

**Critical realism and the persistence of poor
school performance in northern Colombia.**

The difference it makes

Juan David Parra Heredia

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Critical realism and the persistence of poor school performance in northern Colombia.

The difference it makes

Kritisch realisme en de aanhoudende slechte schoolprestaties in Noord-Colombia.

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The logo of Erasmus University, featuring a stylized, cursive script of the word "Erasmus" in a dark blue or black color.

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“It is only in the heart that one can see rightly, what is essential is invisible to the eye”
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (The Little Prince)

“Thoughts without intuitions are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind”
Immanuel Kant

*“to gain insight, to understand, the activity of men and women of a specific historical period, one must start out
by questioning what to them is unquestionable”*
Michael Apple

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary debates about secondary education indicate that Colombian students are lagging behind in international benchmarks for school performance. At the country level, the results of standardised examinations display marked differences across regions, some of which have consistently faced the problem of school failure for (at least) the last three decades. This phenomenon has been researched using a variety of research paradigms (i.e. positivism, structuralism, poststructuralism), none of which have provided a convincing story as to why these schools continue to fail. This dissertation focuses on the study of the persistence of poor school performance introducing the ontology of critical realism to compensate for the failure of other research paradigms in informing explanatory scholarly work in this area of knowledge. One of the main methodological arguments sustained throughout this thesis is that any causal claim in social sciences requires an inquiry that recognises the autonomous, yet intervening, properties of educational structures and the agency of people (i.e. students, parents, teachers) in the making of education policy. Hence, its use of (mostly) qualitative methods, under the umbrella of a realist rationale, to analyse data collected in Northern Colombia to study complex structure and agency interactions to uncover causal mechanisms behind the persistence of educational problems.

Margaret Archer's morphogenetic approach plays a primary role in this thesis in helping to study fallible hypotheses about the historical and contextual drivers that have contributed to limiting the success of educational policy in some regions of the country. According to exponents of *middle range* realism, given the endless possibilities of conceptualisations of social events, the best-known call for abstraction in social research is setting up provisional theoretical constructs (or *hunches*) to guide researchers in the theorisation of causal mechanisms and their operation in different contexts. The purpose of empirical research is, hence, to collect empirical data to validate and/or refine those preliminary theoretical prepositions. In the absence of such theoretical (preliminary) constructs, researchers can contribute to knowledge by making progress in that early process of hypothesis building. In this spirit, this study uses Archer's approach as a Domain-Specific Meta-Theory (DSMT) suitable for bringing together empirical data to build a *middle-range theory* (or that first theoretical construct) about the persistence of school failure in Northern Colombia.

The middle-range theory built in this thesis points to the absence of a real national education project in Colombia because of the lack of empowerment of some subnational actors as stakeholders in the process. For example, evidence provided of the limited level of decentralisation in decision making in primary and secondary education policy in the case of the Department of Atlántico, helps to support the idea that local authorities are not prepared to design and execute educational initiatives that are both responsive to national standards and the needs of people in the region. One consequence of this is that students from the research site fail in exams partly because their socio-cultural environment obscures their perception of the benefits of studying. This explanation is different from the deterministic accounts given by mainstream traditions in school effectiveness research –such as, for instance, the economics of education - which emphasises the skills of teachers as the main driver of school failure. The thesis also exalts the active role of specific groups (i.e. teachers' unions) in shaping contemporary education. Hence, the failure of some agents

to transform educational structures to better suit their preferences and expectations does not reflect a lack of agential efforts to pursue change; rather it reflects the power of other social groups to protect their vested interests in reproducing the status quo. Ontologically speaking, such a causal narrative distances itself from frameworks that consider educational agents as passive recipients of education policy reforms.

SAMENVATTING

In het hedendaagse debat over middelbaar onderwijs blijkt dat Colombiaanse leerlingen achterblijven bij internationale normen voor schoolprestaties. Op landelijk niveau vertonen de resultaten van gestandaardiseerde examens duidelijke verschillen tussen regio's. Sommige regio's hebben al (ten minste) de laatste drie decennia te maken met het probleem van slecht presterende scholen. Dit probleem is onderzocht vanuit verschillende onderzoeksparadigma's (positivisme, structuralisme, poststructuralisme), die geen van alle een overtuigend antwoord geven op de vraag waarom deze scholen nog steeds tekortschieten.

In dit proefschrift worden de aanhoudende slechte schoolprestaties bestudeerd vanuit de ontologie van het kritisch realisme omdat andere onderzoeksparadigma's ontoereikend waren om wetenschappelijke verklaringen te bieden op dit terrein. Een van de belangrijkste methodologische argumenten die in dit proefschrift naar voren worden gebracht is dat elke uitspraak over een oorzakelijk verband in de sociale wetenschappen onderzoek vereist waarin aandacht is voor de autonome, maar interveniërende eigenschappen van onderwijsstructuren en de agency van mensen (d.w.z. studenten, ouders, docenten) bij het maken van onderwijsbeleid. Daarom is bij de data-analyse gebruikgemaakt van (meestal) kwalitatieve methoden binnen een realistische benadering. Deze gegevens zijn verzameld in Noord-Colombia om complexe interacties tussen structuur en agency te bestuderen en zo causale mechanismen achter het voortbestaan van onderwijsproblemen te ontdekken.

De morfogenetische benadering van Margaret Archer speelt een belangrijke rol in dit proefschrift. Deze helpt bij het bestuderen van hypothesen over de historische en contextuele factoren die bijdragen aan het beperkte succes van het onderwijsbeleid in sommige regio's van het land. Volgens exponenten van het *middle range*-realisme (het idee van theorieën met een beperkte reikwijdte) is gezien de eindeloze mogelijkheden om sociale gebeurtenissen te conceptualiseren de bekendste abstractiemethode in sociaal onderzoek het opzetten van voorlopige theoretische constructen (of intuïtieve ideeën). Deze kunnen onderzoekers helpen bij de theorievorming over causale mechanismen en hun werking in verschillende contexten. Het doel van empirisch onderzoek is dan ook om empirische gegevens te verzamelen om die voorlopige theoretische voorspellingen te valideren en/of te verfijnen. Wanneer dergelijke (voorlopige) theoretische constructen ontbreken, kunnen onderzoekers bijdragen aan kennis door vooruitgang te boeken in dat vroege proces van hypothesevorming. Vanuit dit idee wordt Archers benadering in dit onderzoek gebruikt als een domeinspecifieke metatheorie (DSMT) die geschikt is om empirische gegevens samen te brengen om een *middle-rangetheorie* (theorie met beperkte reikwijdte) – of dat eerste theoretische construct – op te stellen over de aanhoudende schooluitval in Noord-Colombia.

Volgens de middle-rangetheorie die in dit proefschrift is ontwikkeld is er in Colombia geen echt nationaal onderwijsproject omdat het sommige subnationale belanghebbenden ontbreekt aan macht. Zo wijst de beperkte decentralisatie van de besluitvorming rond het beleid in het basis- en middelbaar onderwijs in de provincie Atlántico er bijvoorbeeld op dat de lokale autoriteiten niet bereid zijn onderwijsinitiatieven te ontwerpen en uit te voeren die zowel aan de nationale normen als aan de behoeften van de mensen in de regio beantwoorden. Dit heeft onder meer tot gevolg dat leerlingen van de onderzoekslocatie zakken voor hun examens, mede omdat zij vanuit hun sociaal-

culturele achtergrond geen oog hebben voor de voordelen van doorleren. Deze verklaring verschilt van de deterministische verklaringen die worden gegeven door de heersende traditie in onderzoek naar de effectiviteit van scholen. Een voorbeeld hiervan is de onderwijs economie, waarin de bekwaamheid van leerkrachten als belangrijkste oorzaak van schoolsucces geldt.

Het proefschrift benadrukt ook de actieve rol van specifieke groepen (d.w.z. lerarenvakbonden) bij het vormgeven van hedendaags onderwijs. Het feit dat sommige actoren er niet in zijn geslaagd de onderwijsstructuren beter af te stemmen op hun voorkeuren en verwachtingen, wijst dus niet op een gebrek aan inspanningen om verandering tot stand te brengen, maar veeleer op de macht van andere sociale groepen om hun gevestigde belangen te beschermen en de status quo te handhaven. In ontologische termen verschilt dit causale narratief van theoretische kaders waarin onderwijsactoren worden beschouwd als passieve ontvangers van hervormingen in onderwijsbeleid.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ADEA	Atlántico's association of educators
CEPs	Cultural emergent properties
CR	Critical Realism
DANE	<i>National Administrative Department of Statistics</i>
DNP	National Planning Department of Colombia
DSMT	A Domain-Specific Meta-Theory
FECODE	The Colombian Federation of Educators
IBRD	International Bank for the Reconstruction and Development
ICFES	Institute for the Evaluation of Education
MEN	Ministry of Education of Colombia
MGA	Morphogenetic approach
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PEPs	Personal emergent properties
SAC	Structure, agency and culture
SE	School effectiveness
SEPs	Structural emergent properties
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WB	World Bank

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

'Much of science, including social science, tries to explain things we all know, but science can make a contribution by establishing some of the things we all think we know simply are not so. In that case, social science may also explain why we think we know things that are not so, adding as it were a piece of knowledge to replace the one that has been taken away.'

Elster, quoted in Pawson (2013, p. 6).

Pawson's quote reflects much of the spirit of the current doctoral dissertation in providing a fresh look at widely studied topics on school effectiveness (SE) research. The focus of the reflection is the problem of school failure and the material and cultural forces (both of which form part of the concept of *mechanisms* discussed later in the text) that contribute to reproducing the problem in specific human settings. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 'there is widespread and long-standing dissatisfaction with the quality of secondary education. There are many proposals and experiments aimed at changing secondary education from within (...) [but] no model has emerged to replace the status quo' (2013, p. 89). As school systems fail across the planet¹, there is no further need to justify the importance of strengthening the efforts to understand the complexities of education policies, at least as a way to identify new pieces of valuable and cumulative knowledge.

While there are different ontological and epistemological proposals on which to base the study of SE, this is an area of research heavily dominated by managerial and human capital-based approaches to education (Willmott, 2003; Scott, 2005; 2010). Leading scholars of those traditions recognise, however, that there is very little cumulative knowledge on how to improve the performance of students in test scores (Glewwe, Hanushek, Humpage, & Ravina, 2013; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2016). Interestingly, this last statement is not immediately followed, as usually happens, with methodological caveats on the failure of researchers to build non-biased statistical (or econometric) models to study the determinants of school performance². Instead, authors highlight some contextual elements that limit the applicability of certain research methods. The fact is that the scarcity of knowledge about the drivers of school performance exists, as Glewwe et al. (2013) have declared, 'despite large and increasingly sophisticated literature' (p. 52). And, quite 'plausibly, part of the ambiguity comes from (...) [the fact that] the impact of various inputs depends on the local circumstances, demands and capacities' (p. 49).

¹ Not long ago this same organization (UNESCO) reported that one in every four young people in developing countries is unable to read, while its director-general, Irina Bokova, denounced the way in which poor quality in schooling is 'holding back learning even for those who make it to school' (Provost, 2014).

² It is common, among (some) economists, to blame their colleagues for the misspecification of the models they build, rather than debating about the adequacy of those models to study complex human phenomena. Put in Willmott's (2003) words 'SE researchers who adopt statistical methods do not ask what real objects and processes must be like for mathematical representations of them to be adequate. The emphasis on data –on how data are used, how much they should be used, how reliable they are, and so on –detracts from any exploration of social ontology and explanatory methodology. In other words, when problems are acknowledged, there is no exploration of the conceptual and metaphysical problems implicit in the use of statistics' (p. 130).

This thesis situates itself within this methodological debate. It is worth clarifying that the leading SE researchers do not propose the abandonment of the economic approach to education, but rather they suggest to ‘start to [analyse] additional specific features beyond the broad concepts of input variables [analysed] so far’ (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2016, p. 169). Said differently, SE researchers hope that additional empirical data (i.e. the inclusion of new control variables in econometric models) will contribute (on its own) in helping them to understand the phenomena of school failure better. The problem with this position is that it exemplifies what philosophers consider to be an epistemic fallacy, or ‘the view that statements about being [i.e., *what is reality?*] can be reduced to (...) statements about knowledge [i.e., *how to study reality?*]’ (Bhaskar, 1998a, p. 27). Chapter one of this document broadens such critique and discusses the way in which the endorsement of researching frameworks that reproduce this fallacy truncate their possibility of disclosing causal relationships in educational (and social) research. Provided its explicit reflection on this last issue, this Chapter also introduces Critical Realism (CR) as the philosophy guiding the current project.

Taking a critical realist stand bears multiple challenges, particularly in the realm of empirical research. Perhaps the most notorious one is the scarcity of applied CR studies, including the (still) premature reflections on how to conduct field research and analyse data. The *Practical Guide* published by the Oxford University Press and edited by Edwards, O’Mahoney & Vincent (2014) or Maxwell’s (2012) treatise of qualitative data analysis using realism are both valuable contributions in this regard³. Fletcher’s (2017) publication in the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* is quite certainly the most recent (and explicit) proposal (from the date in which this Introduction is being written) on the mechanics of data analysis. However, one problem with many of these proposals, as Chapter Three suggests, is that they tend to fall into the realms of thick social constructivism⁴. The alignment of many political economy scholars with relativism (i.e. placing all the emphasis on the subjective experiences of individuals and communities) is problematic as it drives the focus of research away from important debates on the impact of social structures in the shaping of society. For Arsel & Dasgupta (2015), ‘this common weakness arises from an analytical

³ One interesting alternative to applied scientific realism is represented in Pawson and Tilley’s (1997) developments on realist evaluation (RE). Their work makes important contributions to the art of policy evaluation using the philosophy of CR (at least one that resembles it quite vigorously). However, given the consideration that the objects of research in CR and RE vary quite importantly in both their temporal and space manifestations (one thing is to assess one intervention, and another one is to study the emergence of an education system), the current research did not consider RE as a methodological option. For a relevant discussion on these issues, see Porter (2015).

⁴ The adjective *thick* used next to constructivism implies that CR, as a paradigm, endorses some of the assumptions of constructivist thinking. Such a distinction emerges from conversations between David Marsh and Colin Hay pertaining to the material-ideational debate, and under the umbrella of which it is possible to understand CR as a representative of *thin* social constructivism. For Marsh (2009), who conceives himself as being close to CR thinking, ‘the argument would be that both material and ideational factors contribute to an explanation of outcomes, but the relationship between the two cannot be theorized in any general terms. Rather, the extent to which material or ideational factors contribute to an explanation of particular outcomes is an empirical question. The dialectical position contends that the relationship between the material and the ideational is interactive and iterative. So, ideas provide the context within which ideas are developed, but agents use ideas to interpret, and change, those material constraints, which then provide the content within which ideas are developed, and so it goes on. This is the position I would adopt, and it is the position advocated by Hay (...). However, I shall argue that there is a major divide within this position between thin and thick constructivists and it is a divide where I, as a thin constructivist, am on the other side from Hay’ (p. 680).

approach that uses broader political economy concerns mechanically and deploys them in discrete issue areas without actually working out and empirically articulating the political economy relationships at work at a systemic level' (p. 646).

In that last regard, one major contribution of this thesis is its proposal on how to analyse qualitative data using realist lenses. The key to doing so is the careful reading of the implications of dialectics in CR, which invites researchers to situate their interpretations of the experiences of social agents within a set of hypotheses - or hunches - about the properties of social structures in action (Roberts, 2014). The understanding of social objects (i.e. a failing school) as parts of broader structures (i.e. an educational system), and the conceptualisation of the latter as the result of the interaction of its parts (what realists refer to as a process of emergence), are both in the canonical readings of CR. Even so, empirical studies hardly refer to them. From such a perspective, this dissertation carries out an exploratory inquiry into possible ways of making sense of the dialectical relation between totalities and their parts. That is reflected in how the empirical chapters of this dissertation propose alternative ways of making sense of primary data in a way that, answering Arsel & Dasgupta's (2015) concern, all the subjectivism in the author's interpretations contribute to the production of cumulative knowledge about the operation of education policies in the country.

These methodological reflections inform the study of failing schools (from the perspective of their performance in National Standardised Exams) in Northern Colombia. As such, the project seeks to theorise about the persistent failure of policy efforts to improve SE in (some) sub-regions of the country. The Colombian educational puzzles account for an interesting case that represents the unfulfilled promises of dominant traditions in the field in generating relevant knowledge to transform educational institutions across its territory. This dilemma is visible in the fact that, despite decades of making use of the World Bank's educational funds (Mundy & Verger, 2015), and the country's positive commitment to policy assessment (Urquiola, 2015), its schools have hardly changed (Montoya-Vargas, 2014). While observing some improvements in international education standards, many inequalities in learning inputs and outputs between students and regions persist (García-Villegas, Espinosa, Jimenez, & Parra, 2013; Barrera-Osorio, Maldonado, & Rodriguez, 2014). Part of that panorama depicted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) emphasises the critical situation in which thousands of students find themselves vis-à-vis education:

With 41% of 15-year-olds having repeated at least a year, Colombia makes much greater use than most countries of this ineffective and costly practice (...) Limited and poor quality learning resources, from basic infrastructure to teachers, hamper learning opportunities in schools located in the most disadvantaged urban and rural areas" (OECD, 2016, p. 8).

On this last point, it is worth mentioning that many doctoral dissertations depart from an explicit empirical question, and then proceed to explore theoretical approaches that best suit its answering. Such a problem-driven approach is important, in the sense that it brings a practical perspective to the activity of academics. In fact, the field of development studies, in which the current thesis supposedly fits, is built on the idea that it is 'usually more problem-oriented than other areas of

enquiry because of its preoccupation with the analysis of policy and practice' (Sumner & Tribe, 2008, p. 100). The original conception of this dissertation followed that orientation by posing the problem of poor school performance first, and all theoretical discussions as subsidiary problems to supplying plausible answers to that phenomena. However, such a logical path no longer responds to the current structure of the research project. This is visible in this Introduction as it starts by referring to a methodological, and not an empirical, *problematique*. Citing Porpora's (2015) recent book on *Reconstruction Sociology* helps to provide a rationale for this resulting shift:

We run our doctoral students through one or two courses in sociological theory to ensure they are grounded in the work of the three major founder of sociology -Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber- and to ensure that they are sufficiently familiar with the different paradigms current in sociology that they will be able to pick the one which they will be most comfortable working. Quickly, though, students are urged to leave behind the big questions that divide the paradigms and settle on some concrete, empirical project within one. In other words, students are urged in the direction of what Thomas Kuhn called *normal science*. Normal science is science within a paradigm. Such science does not question the paradigm's basic premises -or if you will, its presuppositions (...) [But do] we need philosophy of science or metatheory? Well, yes. The fact is [we] already have one. The question is whether [we] have the right one (pp. 3, 7).

In its current form, this thesis is no longer so much a dissertation about education in Colombia as it is a reflection on an application of CR to study a case of education politics. Such a shift does not abandon the author's interest in providing an empirical input to national and international educational debates, but rather to his interest in making a contribution to the reflection on how to do valuable educational research. Ultimately, and at least in the Colombian case, experience shows that despite the growing interest in educational studies in recent decades, and their different contributions in some specific matters, there is little cumulative knowledge on how to transform its educational system. As Montoya-Vargas (2014) points out, '[e]ach time the Ministry of Education wants to improve the quality of education, it goes back to the same old formula (...) and wonders why after years of these efforts, schools remain the same' (p. 139). And as for Porpora's (2015) question, is CR the correct philosophy to study these matters? Closing the gate to other alternatives would surely go against the critical spirit he defends. However, few empirical scholars take this quest for good science seriously, as CR does. Part of this thesis, as the reader will find out in the initial chapters of the document, deals with an exploration of the realist ontology to identify its strengths, and limitations, in informing policy debates to respond better to the educational needs of Colombian society.

i. Why Critical Realism?

The choice for CR as the departing ontology for this doctoral project is explicit, as presented in these introductory lines. Hence the title of the dissertation, which is inspired by the title of the

volume *Critical Realism, the difference it makes*, edited by Cruickshank (2003a). The intention of this section of the document is not to expand on the tenets of realism (see Chapters One and Two for that introduction), but to comment on its headline. Why choose CR to inform this thesis and not other research paradigms? Is it possible to suggest *a priori* the superiority of this approach over others to inform the discussion about the persistence of school failure in this research setting? Does departing from a realist position in social theory entail neglecting all possible knowledge claims emerging from other viewpoints from those expressed under the umbrella of realist ontology and epistemology?

Certain answers to these questions entail a risk of falling into types of philosophical foundationalism, by assuming that there are sets of infallible beliefs that serve to anchor all other types of beliefs (O'Brien, 2006). A typical foundationalist position in social theorising entails an argument according to which a set of 'justified basic beliefs are a kind of *foundation* upon which the superstructure of nonbasic justified beliefs rests' (Lemos, 2007, p. 47. Original emphasis). While authors such as Hostettler & Norrie (2003) pose the question of whether CR is foundationalist or not, that is a philosophical matter outside the scope of this thesis⁵. The more pragmatic take of this research is to depart from the specific problem at hand (the persistence of poor school performance) and pose the following question: is social research in education providing a satisfactory answer to the problem of school failure and its persistence in time? If the answer is a negative one, then no further justification is needed to try something different.

The clarification made in the last paragraph is relevant to help the reader understand the purpose and the logic behind the discussion in Chapter One of the dissertation. That Chapter deals with the presentation of the main ontological concepts of CR backing up the whole methodological endeavour of this project, and introduces the notion an *immanent critique* as an analytical tool to judge social theories from within (i.e. the consistency between their ontological, epistemological, methodological and empirical claims)⁶. In the light of the identification of problems in those

⁵ Cruickshank (2003) provides one clue in that regard, by suggesting that CR has an 'anti-foundational epistemology, based on the notion that our knowledge of the world is mediated through conceptual schemes' (p. 1). Said differently, one can argue that CR does not commit to a foundational epistemology in the sense that it endorses epistemic relativism (all social theories are fallible accounts of reality). However, such an epistemology draws on a basic constitutive ontology (see Chapter One) which could suggest that CR does endorse some (ontological) foundationalism. Of course, this is a different type of foundationalism from one endorsed by, for instance, positivism, whose basic beliefs find, in the best of cases, weak justifications about human rationality and the quantification causes and effects (as regularities) through empiricism.

⁶ The notion of an immanent critique has different interpretations in the work of philosophers of knowledge. The classical understanding of an immanent critique is attributed to the work of Immanuel Kant. One distinctive feature of Kant's transcendental argument, according to Bhaskar, is that it 'stems from the existence of sense experience' (Bhaskar & Callinicos, 2003, p. 97). Such dictum, according to which 'philosophy (...) shalt not commit ontology, that you can't say anything about the world' (Bhaskar & Callinicos, 2003, p. 98) entails a philosophical barrier for engaging an analysis from within (an immanent critique). 'Someone will say to you well, actually, you can't talk about something that's real, because, actually, that's just talk' (p. 98). The Bhaskarian sense of an immanent critique is built over an explicit distinction between ontology and epistemology (see Chapter One), and hence it departs from recognising, in opposition to Kant, that one can make real (or essential statements) about the world. A principle guiding his view of an immanent critique departs, hence, from a premise that is implicitly or explicitly accepted by others (i.e. by opponents in a conversation). In the case of social science, we would ask something like 'give me something you think is really important, that you think is epistemically valid or significant' (p. 98). One argument that arguably all epistemic schools of thought in social sciences endorse is that it is possible to explain how something changes to become something else. In the case of education policy, as Chapter One contends, the different schools of thought that (even if they are

regards, ‘the only way in which an inconsistency between the current shape of a social practice and its implicit norms can be resolved requires transforming the practice into a different practice’ (Stahl, 2017, p. 4). From that point of view, the use of CR to criticise other approaches (all of which, as the Chapter discusses, encounter limitations in accounting for observable facts about education) is justifiable as a means of engaging in a new practice in policy research. Its growing use in educational analysis, as suggested in Chapter One, further contributes in making realist ontology an appealing approach with which to try something different (or innovative) in this dissertation. Such an approach illustrates the intention of this document not to address ontological and epistemological principles as infallible sets of beliefs, but rather as alternative principles (vis-à-vis those of other approaches) to seek more efficient ways to unleash the potential of social research to contribute to the transformation of education practices in a country like Colombia.

Hence, a question that follows is, transform what aspects of education? Such a reflection relates to the expectations that a spectator might place on the results of this dissertation. The question also has a normative tone, in the sense that it suggests somehow interrogating the author’s take on the issue. For instance, is it possible to equate school failure with the performance of students in standardised examinations? Is that a proper standard (or should it constitute one) to address debates such as the quality of primary and secondary education? These matters are at the heart of the education policy literature over (at least) the four last decades⁷. However, as tempting as it might be to endorse a position on that debate a priori, the methodological approach of this project is to begin by assuming indicators of educational outputs (i.e. test scores) simply as indications of something that education policies expect to change positively. Hence, the fact that one can observe hardly any improvement in time in those indicators in some regions of the country represents an interesting question in itself. The normative claim of the project is still crucial if it intends to help to transform schools. Hence, once the theoretical endeavour of this thesis is complete, the researcher will have more elements to provide a position in the SE debate.

The next section of this Introduction provides an overview of the thesis and its parts, in which the author clarifies the way in which many of the former arguments materialise in an exploratory study about school failure in Colombia. In some sense, given the failure of current schools of thought in answering the question on the persistence of school failure, and provided the intention to suggest something new, this thesis explores the benefits of introducing a new paradigm and its application to the debate.

ontologically ill-equipped or unable to say anything about causation) seek to theorise about the reasons behind school failure. Critical realism, as this dissertation discusses, provides an explicit ontological argument to ground the understanding of scientific discovery in the social world. From that point of view, it is possible to argue that ‘immanent critiques developed by others for their purposes [as Bhaskarian critical realism as an immanent critique of the mainstream approaches to science] can be incorporated into one’s own approach’ (Isaksen, 2016, pp. 15-16). To recapitulate, the approach of this research on an immanent critique is not of a Kantian nature, but rather in the analytical sense of the concept, to criticise social theories about educational failure from within, but making reference to the ontological tenets of critical realism.

⁷ It is well known by scholars that, for example, the school effectiveness movement was a response to the fatalism and pessimism encrypted in the literature on the sociology of education of the 1970’s according to which, for example, ‘schools situated in working-class neighbourhoods were bound to be unsuccessful’ (Chitty, 1997, p. 55).

ii. An overview of the thesis and its parts

The dissertation responds to the following research question and sub-questions: *How to explain the persistence of poor school performance in National Standardised Exams in municipalities in Northern Colombia? What type of behavioural guidance (or situational logics) emerge from educational structures acting upon the communities (i.e. teachers, parents, students) of failing schools in Northern Colombia? How do local agents (at schools) mediate the conditioning power of educational structures?* It will be important to discuss such queries further and within the specific ontological and epistemological approach of the whole project. That reflection forms part of the content of Chapter Two of this document. However, pedagogically speaking, the reader might find it useful to start thinking about these questions as a way of providing a (more) concrete context in which to situate the methodological insights from the rest of this Introduction and the first chapters of the thesis. One thing that is worth highlighting at this moment is the explicit presentation of the problem as one of *persistence*, and not simply as a matter of school performance (in the very short run). The presentation of Archer's approach in the first chapters of the dissertation is coherent with this fact, in the sense that this thesis aims to research matters of endurance (in the constitution of education institutions), rather than simply reflect upon (in short run) pedagogical matters (which are nonetheless of extreme relevance).

At the core of CR lies a methodological argument against pure forms of induction and deduction as the basis of causal research (Wuisman, 2005). The chapters in Part I of the dissertation dig into such a debate. For the time being, however, it is relevant to mention that realists endorse the logic of retrodution, a 'mode of inference in which events are explained by postulating (and identifying) mechanisms which are capable of producing them' (Sayer, 1992, p. 107). Table 1 is an adaption of Danemark et al.'s (2002) stages of explanatory research, which explicitly seeks to operationalise a retroductive researching strategy. The *model* serves as a guideline 'and not as a template to be followed to the letter' (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002, p. 109)⁸.

The thesis seeks to cover these stages, but this structure needs further justification. That is the task of Chapter One in Part I of the dissertation, which starts with a discussion of different contributions from Colombian SE scholars, focusing on their strengths and weaknesses. With the introduction of the concept of an *immanent critique*, the Chapter delves into theoretical and meta-theoretical (or philosophical) aspects of dominant educational research in the country and argues in favour of the stratified ontology of CR as a fruitful approach to allow the production of cumulative knowledge about education. These reflections are now published in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* (Parra J. D., 2018) and part of the literature review on existent studies in SE in Colombia appears in a peer-reviewed article in *Gist: Education and Learning Research Journal* (Parra J. D., 2015).

⁸ The ontological debate presented in Chapter One will bring clarity to the reader on the inconvenience of framing research as a one size fits all type of recipe, as many of the approaches that CR is critical of do. The key concept here is the notion of the operation of social research in open systems.

Figure 1. The stages of an explanatory research grounded in critical realism

Stage 1: Description and analytical resolution
Explanatory social sciences usually start with descriptions of the concrete events under study. One important part of these descriptions are the interpretations of the persons involved and their way of describing the current situation. This is a phase in which researchers need to define, among the multiple elements related to one particular event (i.e. school failure), the focus of the study.
Stage 2: Abduction
This stage implies interpreting and redescribing the different components/aspects from hypothetical conceptual frameworks and theories about structures and relations. Here several different theoretical interpretations and explanations can and should be present, compared and possibly integrated with one another.
Stage 3: Retrodution
This stage consists of trying to find answers to questions like: What is fundamentally constitutive for the structures and relations (X)? How is X possible? What properties must exist for X to be what X is? What causal mechanisms are related to X? In the concrete research process, there are many cases in which there are already established concepts (i.e. from previous research) supplying satisfactory answers to questions of this type.
Stage 4: Comparison and concretisation
Theories on social mechanisms explaining social events need to be compared with competing explanations to assess their explanatory power. Here one stresses the importance of studying the way mechanisms interact with other mechanisms at different levels, under specific conditions.

Source: adapted from Danermark et al. (2002, pp. 109-111)

Chapter Two introduces Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach (MGA) as the meta-theoretical device of the thesis. The MGA helps to address, in a rather transversal manner, the stages in Table 1. The rationale for arguing so follows from Mahoney & Vincent's (2014) next methodological assertion:

Once a literature review or an immanent critique has been undertaken, the CR researcher will begin the process of data collection with at least some idea of the potential mechanisms active in the empirical domain. However, knowledge of extant theories will not determine what the focus of the researcher should be because (a) theories are expected to be fallible and thus may not be applicable, may be wrong or in need of correction, (b) the mechanisms specified by theory may not be actualized and thus difficult to explore, and (c) the context of the research environment may not permit the study of the events which are associated with the actualization mechanisms (...). [A]lthough the critical realist approach to the specifics of data collection may not differ considerably from any other approach, the researcher is likely to be guided by a (potentially implicit or unfinished) 'domain-specific' theoretical framework which indicates where attention might be focused (pp. 14, 15)

A Domain-Specific Meta-Theory (DSMT)⁹, as the last quote suggests, is one that ‘is constructed by developing an immanent critique of existing paradigms that deal with a particular research area’ (Cruickshank, 2003, p. 122). Under such an understanding of social theorising, a DSMT operates under the umbrella of a general metatheory (or set of ontological principles) - in this case, CR - and provides researchers with methodological guidance to engage in a kind of empirical research that addresses the methodological problems of alternative researching strategies. Archer’s (1995) morphogenetic framework acts, hence, as a DSMT, to guide the processes of data collection, analysis and interpretation. Porpora (2013) endorses such a take on the MGA, particularly in the field of political economy, in which the current dissertation fits¹⁰:

Archer’s morphogenetic approach caught on at least in realist circles, broadly enough to be equated with the realist approach to social theory. I myself have been one of its strongest supporters, describing it as a contemporary articulation of the pivotal principle underlying a non-reductive Marxian approach to political economy (...). As such, morphogenesis is a meta-theoretical rather than a theoretical conception (p. 25).

Sayer’s (1992) distinction between *theories as ordering-frameworks* and *theories as conceptualisation* is of extreme relevance here, to clarify these methodological arguments. In the former, researchers build structured models with pre-determined relationships between variables, with the aim of explaining social phenomena and making some predictions. Such reasoning seems valid in disciplines such as economics, particularly in the field of SE research, validating the use of education (econometric) production functions and theoretical constructs based on rational behaviour to forecast/explain school failure and success. According to the discussion of Chapter One of this dissertation, such a type of economic determinism fails to meet standards to be able to count as a scientific approach to study school failure. Sayer (1992) also introduces, on the other hand, the notion of theorising as a way ‘to prescribe a particular way of conceptualizing something’ (p. 50), which emanates much of the spirit of DSMTs. For him, such a strategy ‘is more common in subjects characterized by fundamental divisions and considerable philosophical and methodological introspection’ (p. 51). Chapter Two of the dissertation argues why a non-linear and non-standardised approach to

⁹ The reader will note that this term adds “Meta” to the concept of a “domain-specific theory” that appears in the last quote. Mahoney & Vincent (2014), as they explicitly account for it, draw on Cruickshank’s (2003) levels of social theorising. In his original exposition of those levels of theorising, Cruickshank does not use the term domain-specific theory, but refers to the need of doing empirical research to inform specific theories (i.e. a theory of school failure in the specific research sites of this project). The author of this dissertation interprets, hence, that when Mahoney & Vincent (2014) refer to a domain-specific theory, they are actually referring to Cruickshank’s (2003) understanding of a DSMT.

¹⁰ According to Watson (2005), as he writes in his *Foundations of International Political Economy*, the aim of such a disciplinary field ‘should be the study of individual action within the context of institutionalized economic norms (...). [T]he starting point must be one in which the “E” [in Political Economy, PE] refers not to logical propositions about the economy [and society] that can be derived from the rationality postulate, but the study of economic [and societal and political] relations as they are constituted and experienced in the everyday life’ (2005, pp. 5-6). While this dissertation is about education, it aims to study the way in which specific forms of institutionalisation of economic, political and social norms (material and cultural) shape (in the form of a structure and agency interactions) the persistence of school failure in Northern Colombia.

retroductive research benefits from viewing social theorisation as a way of conceptualising complex interactions between structure and agency. The MGA, once again, plays that role in the current research project, in the sense that it offers a meta-theoretical window to conceptualise how educational structures shape students' performance at schools and specify, via empirical research, how those relationships operate in particular settings.

In that same Chapter, the reader will find some extensions on that discussion, for instance a brief debate on why the MGA is suitable -vis-à-vis other approaches (i.e. Jessop's (2005) and Hay's (2002) Strategic-Relational Approach) to address stages 3 and 4 of Table 1. Many of those reflections form part of a single-authored article in the peer-reviewed journal *Sociedad y Economía* (Parra J. D., 2016). Likewise, the Chapter delves into the implications of using the MGA as a DSMT and not as an Explanatory Programme (EP) (as Archer presents it in her original work) to build a complete causal account, but only as an indicative one, for the persistence of poor school performance in the Colombian Caribbean. Such an endeavour is built on epistemological arguments grounded in CR that recognise, for instance, that 'the context of the research environment may not permit the study of the events which are associated with the actualisation mechanisms' (Mahoney & Vincent, 2014, p. 15). Some context specificities, such as the novelty of CR in Latin America as a language (or way of thinking) acknowledged in public policy debates, signified a research environment that demanded additional efforts from the researcher not only to apply but, before that, to justify the migration towards a realist way of doing social research. The scarcity of developments in the literature on how to engage in realist empirical research (i.e. on how to analyse data), but also regarding experiences reporting the use of Archer's work to solve causal inquiries in social science, entailed additional challenges to deploy a full morphogenetic analysis in the thesis. The final output of the project better suits, therefore, what Pawson & Tilley (1997) refer to as a *middle-range theory*. In their account:

Cumulation in evaluation research is thus about producing middle-range theory, of a kind abstract enough to underpin the development of a range of program types yet concrete enough to withstand testing in the details of program implementation. (...) We (...) follow this path into the domain of the empirical in order to examine how the data collected can be marshalled for the task of providing a cumulative body of information on program effectiveness. Put simply, the key to the process is that data collection and analysis are not simply directed to the task of discovering whether a set of programs works and 'aggregating' the results; rather the task is to test, refine and adjudicate the middle-range theories produced at (a certain) level (116-124)

While Pawson & Tilley's (1997) contextualise their discussion about middle-range theories in the realm of policy evaluation, it is possible to extrapolate their thinking, which is explicitly a realist one, to the current research setting. The take on retroduction as endorsed by realist researchers - against simple forms of induction and/or deduction (see Chapter Two) - recognises that social research is messy, given the multiple causal forces acting in parallel to generate certain social phenomena. Hence, as Archer (2011) contends, ' [sociology] begins from hunches [and] not from naming the parts [of those underlying forces], and probably would not get anywhere if it were to

start from there' (p. 61). The use of the MGA as a DSMT, given the multiple caveats mentioned so far, thus represents an effort to organise empirical data in the form of a partial, yet ontologically well grounded (vis-à-vis other social theories) middle-range theory on the specificities of structure and agency interactions in education in Northern Colombia. After closing that discussion, Chapter Two also introduces the research questions and sub-questions and delves into the discussion about methods. While each empirical Chapter contains a discussion on specific data collection tools devised for particular purposes of the research methodology, Chapter Two introduces general elements of doing qualitative analysis (i.e. the logic of interviewing, the use of computer software) using a realist ontology.

Now, one implication emerging from Archer's (1995) analysis is that any attempt to explain social change or reproduction requires addressing the interplay between structure, culture and agency. That 'entails the exploration of those features of both which are prior or posterior to one another and of which causal influences are exerted by one (...) on the other, and vice versa, by virtue of [their] independent properties and powers' (pp. 14, 15). By endorsing what realists refer to as analytical dualism (see Chapter Two)¹¹, CR invites researchers to study the independent properties of both educational (material and ideational) structures and the individuals and collectives that inhabit them, and then study their mutual interplay. Parts II and III of the dissertation focus on the first part of that last methodological statement. Chapters Three and Four delve into the complexities of human interactions in the field sites, by studying the way in which diverse educational actors (i.e. students, teachers, parents) mediate local and national education policies. Chapters Five and Six, on the other hand, focus on the study of the structural properties of the Colombian educational system, and the way it operates - because of a process of political decentralisation - in local settings. The thick descriptions of all these agency-led and structure-led elements bridge the process of abduction and a first stage in the process of retrodution in Table 1.

Finally, Part IV of this document links the empirical insights from Parts II and III into the form of morphogenetic analysis. As Archer (1995) contends, '[the] task of social theory cannot be restricted to the mere identification of social structures as emergent properties, it must also supply an analytical history of their emergence which accounts for why matters are so and not otherwise' (p. 165). In that way and given the caveats in using as a DSMT discussed above, the MGA helps to study the interplay between structure and agency, answering stages 3 and 4 (or the phase of retrodution) in Table 1. Said differently, by taking the relationship between material structures, human agency and culture seriously, the document opens the scope for causally linking the events observed by the researcher in two Colombian sub-regions, with broader national and international educational debates. It is in the depth of this analysis where its potential lies to contribute to policy discussions beyond the specific research setting of the dissertation. Such a level of comprehensiveness is what makes the contributions of a CR-informed case study more valuable than any large-scale inquiry that resorts to the limited foundations of empiricism.

¹¹ Not all realists endorse this concept. Hence it is important to say that its use belongs more to the Archerian take on CR.

iii. A (brief) message to the reader

Ritzer & Stepnisky (2018) write the following note on Auguste Comte, conceived by many as the founder of the paradigm of positivism [see Paquette, Beauregard, & Gunter (2017)]:

Comte was greatly disturbed by the anarchy that pervaded French society and was critical of those thinkers who had spawned both the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. He developed his scientific view – *positivism*, or *positive philosophy* – to combat what he considered to be the negative and destructive philosophy of the Enlightenment. Comte was in line with, and influenced by, the French counterrevolutionary Catholics (especially Boald and Maistre). However, his work can be set apart from theirs in at least two grounds. First, he thought it was not possible to return to the Middle Ages; advances in science and industry made that impossible. Second, he developed a much more sophisticated theoretical system than his predecessors, one that was adequate to shape a good portion of early sociology.

Comte developed social physics, or what in 1839 he called sociology (...). The use of the term social physics made it clear that Comte sought to model sociology after the *hard sciences*. This new science, which in his view would ultimately become the new dominant science, was to be concerned with both social statics (existing social structures) and social dynamics (social change). Although both involved that search for laws and social life, he felt that social dynamics were more important than social statics. This focus on change reflected his interest in social reform, particularly reform of the ills created by the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. Comte did not urge revolutionary change because he felt natural evolution of society would make things better. Reforms were needed only to assist the process a bit (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2018, p. 16. *Original emphases*)

This biographical sketch is relevant to convey to the readers one important message about the author's motivation behind this whole thesis. And to do so, it is also relevant to quote Roy Bhaskar, the founder of CR:

What is really important to remember about the stress on science is that I do not see science as being opposed to humanity; there is not a contrast between science and the realm of humanity, culture, and history, nor in particular is there another contrast between science and emancipation. Science properly understood, which is the crucial thing, is an agent of emancipation, and what I think we have to stress here is that for critical realism science is always specific to its subject matter. Positivism's standard received view of science is doubly wrong in the field of the human world, because it is not an account of what natural science does, let alone of what social science or any other form of science does. Undoubtedly the fact that critical realism starts from science lends itself to the charge of scientism, so let me just reiterate why I started there. I started

from science because it was the most prestigious intellectual practice and I was concerned about problems of poverty and so on in the Third World. It was obvious to me that we needed to understand, first, what the problem was (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2010, p. 213).

As Chapter One of this document stresses, the most influential works in SE research come from positivist research frameworks. The foundations of positivism, as described in Ritzer & Stepnisky's (2018) note, coheres with a political endeavour to pursue positive changes for the common good. Just like Comte, positivist thinkers praise scientific rigour and sophistication as enablers of these *desirable* social transformations. However, as the same excerpt contends, change presents itself as an inevitable force that researchers can only contribute to by guiding, but do not need to unleash. Hence that popular section demanded of (mostly junior) researchers in the presentation of their findings, pertaining to their recommendations (or policy prescriptions) to allow a smoothing of the natural evolution of society.

Given this belief in social transformation, many readers might receive the current dissertation as an extremely pessimistic outlook on contemporary educational policies and their achievements. The title of the thesis might be taken as a reflection of the former, given the fixation on the phenomenon of school failure, rather than in the study of cases of success. This document is an exemplar of the *failure complex*, using the expression of Albert Hirshman - and recently coined by a Ministry of the Colombian government, many would argue. Such a message represents, however, the opposite of the author's attitude towards educational change. There are at least two elements from Bhaskar & Hartwig's (2010) quote that serve to justify why engaging in a critique of positivist thinking is, on the contrary, a way of rooting for relevant social transformations. The first one is the notion that positivism erroneously conflates science with rigour. The second one is that positivism relies on a controverted assumption of the natural course of the evolution of societies. The discussion now focuses on further arguing both of these points.

The first of these elements is the fact that the presentation of positivism as a basis for scientific research is misleading. As Chapter One will further discuss, empiricism (or the practice of grounding explanatory research in the observation of empirical phenomena) is the basis of positivism and contributes to making the former a very weak representation of how science actually works. If positivist thinkers argue that scientific research is key to informing society about the social mechanism that should foster positive change, their weak commitment to science represents a foundational barrier to achieving this primary goal. That is to say, the positivist discourse of mainstream SE researchers on change based on empiricism cannot serve as a platform to sustain their optimism. The positivist attack on *pessimists* is, hence, meaningless.

The second critical element to positivism emerging from Bhaskar & Hartwig's (2010) excerpt emanates from the idea of the need of 'understanding first, what the problem was'. Back to Comte's reference, Ritzer & Stepnisky (2018) emphasise the positivist idea of 'the natural evolution of society'. On that matter, Watson (2005) has written a whole introduction to the *New International Political Economy* to ultimately argue that many of the foundations upon which modern societies

build their institutions lie, precisely, in the idea of allowing human nature to follow its path¹². But, then again, he concludes that such an approach ‘can tell us little about the nature of the world in which we live today, or about how the world came to be the way it is. It can tell us even less about how we might reshape the world for the future’ (p. 243). As positivist thinkers assume human nature, they devote minimum efforts to studying the real drivers of the behaviour of individuals in different settings of society. From that point of view, mainstream SE has little to offer to the understanding of why, under different circumstances, educational changes happen or not.

What the reader will find throughout these pages is hence an effort to overcome many of the flaws of positivism in seeking to inform society of the real challenges of education. Part of that challenge is that the positivist way of thinking is deeply embedded in society. The situation is particularly challenging in Latin America, a continent heavily exposed to the positivist rhetoric and its resulting combination ‘of an insatiable capitalist elite, passive citizens, and a stalled social imagination.’ (Palma, 2009, p. 262). Contrary to dead-end pessimism, this thesis calls for that urgent need for societies to embrace their past, present and future to explore new and more promising - and creative - paths to face their multiple challenges.

¹² Watson (2005) explicitly addresses such critique: ‘My position on this point is to reiterate the claims of those who suggest that most (...) scholars still have some way to go before their mode of inquiry breaks down the false dichotomy between *politics* and *economics*. Indeed, I will go further to say that, while most (...) scholars pay lip-service to the artificial nature of that dichotomy, in practice their studies serve merely to reinforce it (...) The assumption of rational behavior is treated by (...) scholars almost if it were axiomatic. Agents are assumed to optimize subject to certain constraints (...) [But rationality] cannot be simply taken-as-given as a starting assumption on which to conduct analysis, for it is an outcome whose explanation is the *goal* of that analysis’ (pp. 19, 27. *Original emphases*).

PART I: FROM ONTOLOGY TO METHODOLOGY

Part I of this dissertation is about justifying the ontological and epistemological path informing the current research. The literature review introduced in these first sections accounts for the state of school effectiveness (SE) studies in Colombia, in its different epistemic traditions, and situates Critical Realism (CR) as a metatheory to transcend many of the flaws of scholarly production from scholars in the country. Chapters One and Two seek to establish a coherent methodological framework for this research, which builds a linkage between the ontological departure point of the document, and the different phases of its methodological strategy, including the posing of research questions and the selection of data collection methods. The explicit connection between CR, as a governing paradigm of the study, with Archer's social theory, by making clear their linkages through the logic of abduction and retroduction, is an exercise that is left only implicit in many other research settings. As such, one contribution of Part I of the research is to bring clarity about such connections, a task that helps in visualising the potential of realism and its contributions to research in social sciences.

Now, one specific aim of the whole discussion in this first part of the dissertation is to convey to the reader both the strengths and the limitations of the research design of the thesis. By emphasising the arguments for using Archer's morphogenetic framework as a Domain-Specific Meta-Theory (DSMT), rather than as an Explanatory Programme (EP), Chapter Two restates the aim of the document in offering a kind of middle-range theory to explain the persistence of school failure in Colombia. As mentioned in the Introduction, reaching that final output of the research entailed a set of reflections on methodology and methods, which are research outputs by themselves. The understanding of this project as a methodological reflection with the potential to inform policy debates, rather than an analysis of education policies in Colombia *per se*, should encourage the reader to value its multiple methodological and method-based contributions equal to the (final) empirical reflection that it offers. Bhaskar (2014) himself wrote, before his death in the fall of 2014, 'if CR is to be "serious", it must be applicable (...). Despite this, there is a dearth of such [kinds of] texts. For even when one has begun to grasp some principles of basic critical realism, it will not be obvious how exactly one is to "do it"' (p. iii). His conception is of CR as an under-labourer, with the potential to increase the quality and the scientificity of social research, but with important challenges pending when it comes to its application. Hence, one important contribution of this dissertation is on the art of doing research grounded in a realist ontology and epistemology.

Chapter One: Critical realism and school effectiveness research in Colombia: the difference it should make¹³

1.1. Introduction

As indicated in the Introduction of the dissertation, according to Glewwe, et al. (2013) ‘despite large and increasingly sophisticated literature, remarkably little is known about the impact of education policies on student outcomes in developing countries’ (p. 49). Such a phenomenon, they argue, might find part of its explanation in the heterogeneity of econometric effects found across different contexts (i.e. countries, sub-regions). And while their take on how to solve the issue is to sustain and improve the quality of localised quantitative work, their critique invites researchers to debate the value of existent research informing education policy debates.

The value of educational research is of relevance in Latin America, a region that has become a type of ideal laboratory for the implementation of guidelines and evidence-based policy practices, pedagogics and innovation (Rambla & Veger, 2009). In that context, Colombia is representative of the dilemma between *good (or relevant) research* and the *lack of effective knowledge* to transform its educational system. This is visible in the fact that, despite the status of the country as a top borrower of the World Bank’s educational funds (Mundy & Verger, 2015), and its positive commitment to policy assessment (Urquiola, 2015), schools have hardly changed (Montoya-Vargas, 2014). While observing some improvements in international education standards, many inequalities in learning inputs and outputs between students and regions persist (García-Villegas et al. 2013; Barrera-Osorio et al., 2014; OECD, 2016).

This Chapter addresses one dimension of such a debate, which is the relevance of the dominant research frameworks informing school effectiveness studies in the country. This initial inquiry is important for the purpose of the current research project, as established in the Introduction, to advance, a methodological contribution, to the idea of doing empirical research in education in a way that it helps to inform policy debates in Colombia. Drawing on Clegg’s (2005) take on scientificity in educational research, bringing in scientific rigour into policy discussions implies making explicit efforts to explain why, under some specific circumstances, some regularities (i.e. poor school performance), and not others, exist. Hence, if scholars aim to inform policymakers on what might work, they need to make an explicit effort to explain *why* certain policy interventions have worked and, conversely, why ‘after years of (...) efforts, [many] schools remain the same’ (Montoya-Vargas, 2014, p. 139)¹⁴. The guiding research question for this analysis is, therefore, to what extent, and why, are dominant research frameworks in the country (i.e. their focus, their methodologies) contributing to answering *why* type of questions that should be relevant for effective

¹³ An article version of this chapter is published in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. Some of these ideas are also published in the *Gist: Education and learning research journal* (Colombian indexed, but not as a top journal) and a short Book published by the Colombian think tank Dejusticia. The book is co-authored with Mauricio García-Villegas, Jose Rafael Espinosa and Felipe Jiménez.

¹⁴ This critique will imply that, before engaging with the assessment of policy initiatives in education (i.e. the impact of RCTs in education), scholars should be able to deliver policy inputs pertaining to more general answers to aggregated trends in education.

policy-making. The conclusions that emerge from this initial reflection will hence inform the next steps in the research design and the empirical work of the dissertation in its quest to transcend the limitations of existing work in the field of secondary education politics.

1.2. Methodological note for the analysis of this chapter

The research strategy in this section of the thesis best suits the principles of an immanent critique. Mahoney and Vincent (2014), explain that such a method:

provides a critique from within a theoretical position and identifies contradictions, ambiguities, or inconsistencies (...). [This] process may, depending on one's methodology, be iterative: the identification of the best-fit theories may emerge as more and more data are collected, and theories that are developed become those to be critiqued (2014, p. 14)

As suggested by Cruickshank (2003), different approaches to theorise about social phenomena can be subjected 'to an immanent critique to see to what extent the terms of reference used [by different scholars] can help us understand the issue of [for instance, school failure]' (p. 122). Hence, this first step in identifying the limitations of scholarly research in SE in the country can benefit from engaging in such an exercise by contrasting theoretical propositions in the literature vis-à-vis observational data (i.e. the evolution of test scores). The analysis consists of first identifying the strengths and weaknesses of different theoretical stands in explaining empirical patterns of the data, to judge each alternative (regarding its power to explain such data) separately. To avoid the use of arbitrary criteria, [immanent] critiques need 'taking [their] departure from minor premises accepted or implied by the account that it seeks to situate, correct or refute' (Hartwig, 2008, p. xiv). The basic premise guiding the current analysis is that science works (Cruickshank, 2003), and, therefore, that it is possible to identify causal mechanisms that account for specific educational phenomena (Clegg, 2005). That is a premise that is necessarily accepted by scholars studying the *causal process* of policies affecting school effectiveness, given their intention to inform policymakers on how to alter policy outcomes *causally*.

The structure of this Chapter reflects the steps of an immanent critique. The first task examines the explanatory outcomes of alternative theories of school failure, by assuming or accepting their internal (methodologically speaking) logic. For example, as one of the common practices in the economics of education is to run regressions, one way of engaging with the findings of that strand of literature is to replicate some econometric exercises. Again, this first part of the discussion seeks to recognise strengths and limitations of available literature vis-à-vis certain empirical regularities in the realm of education. In this sense, the first reading of scholarly work focuses on their empirical contributions and (possible) omissions in answering *why* type of questions.

The next step in the immanent critique implies delving into meta-theory to judge the quality of scientific approaches in educational research. A metatheory, it is worth specifying, is a 'coherent set of interlocking principles that both describes and prescribes what is meaningful and meaningless, acceptable and unacceptable, central and peripheral (...) in a scientific discipline' (Overton, 2007,

p. 154). These types of arguments, therefore, work as an orientation for research practices, seeking coherence between empirical methods, theories and methodologies. The analyses in this part of the text lie in the meta-theory of Critical Realism (CR), which provides the explicit grounding in the debate on how to bring scientificity into social (and educational) research (Bhaskar, 1998; Clegg, 2005; Brown, 2009; Edwards G. , 2014).

1.3. The state of affairs: recent contributions by Colombian scholars

A preliminary survey of relevant literature (García-Villegas et al., 2013; Parra, 2015) identifies two general trends in the frameworks informing school effectiveness research in Colombia: the economics of education and theories of social reproduction. In the second case, one could open different subcategories (i.e. neo-Marxist accounts, studies based on hermeneutics) backing up scholarly work. However, given that the first of these trends corresponds to the dominant framework backing up policy debates (López & Puentes, 2010; Parra J. , 2015) it makes more sense to proceed with the analysis by only using two broad categories: mainstream (economics of education) and non-mainstream (social reproduction) research. In the academic literature, there is a clear imbalance (i.e. regarding academic outputs and their actual citation by policymakers) between these trends, which explains why the subsequent discussion focuses more broadly on the dominant paradigm.

1.3.1. The economics of education¹⁵ (mainstream research)¹⁶

Since the publication of studies such as Piñeros & Rodríguez's (1999), and Gaviria & Barrientos' (2001), multivariate regressions on test scores have set the methodological standards for SE research in Colombia. The Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education (ICFES) compiles available data for national exams in a nested fashion – i.e. of students within schools – this method favours the use of multi-level modelling (MLM) to measure the effects of individual and school-level characteristics on educational achievement (Bickel, 2007).

This section of the document profits from the availability of administrative data on individual test scores to apply an econometric regression analysis exploring findings in the tradition of the economics of education. That is a common practice within the logic of mainstream economic thinking in educational research. Table 1 describes the selected variables used to estimate relevant education production functions. Such a selection is guided by a detailed survey of the literature in search of common research practices and frameworks among Colombian scholars [see García-Villegas et al. (2013)]. The use of MLM estimates -which accounts for the canon in this tradition - and the introduction of lagged controlled variables in the econometric specification - seeks to minimise statistical estimation biases (Bickel, 2007; Wooldridge, 2002).

Moving to the statistical results (See Appendix 2 for an explanation of the mechanics of MLMs), estimates in Table 2 reveal a robust correlation between income-related variables and test scores, even after controlling for school and municipality (or regional) characteristics. Statistical evidence

¹⁵ This critique elaborates upon the study of the determinants of quality in education. These includes those studies on the general drivers of school performance, and not those that refer to the effect of particular interventions.

¹⁶ Appendix 1 includes notes on the international literature about the determinants of school performance.

also shows high levels of inequality in test scores between schools, reflected in a rather high intra-class correlation¹⁷ that lies between 33%-35% (Van der Berg, 2008; Liu, 2014). This finding matches those reported by Duarte et al. (2012) for five main Colombian cities and contrasts with some recent PISA-based estimates which show ranges of 18% to 23% for Austria, Canada, New Zealand and the United States (Milford & Anderson, 2011).

Many other variables show the expected signs, according to economic theory, in their estimation coefficients. Such is the case of proxies for the quality of teachers, student-teacher ratios and the enrollment of individuals in educational institutions with a full-time schooling schedule. Other coefficients, however, contradict some theoretical predictions, such as, for example, the negative effect of municipal financial resources on school performance. These results match, however, with findings from studies on the effects of the political decentralisation of public services delivery that highlight how local financial resources tend to be misused when they do not contribute to the strengthening of managerial capacities of local institutions (Faguet & Sánchez, 2008; Rodriguez, 2010).

When it comes to policy prescriptions, researchers justify efforts to strengthen schools in a variety of ways. On the one hand, they argue that high intra-class statistical correlations (relative to other societies) imply that schools in Colombia have the potential to reduce inequalities (Gaviria & Barrientos, 2001). On the other hand, scholars in this tradition maintain that non-school variables (such as the income of the households) are more important to outcomes than education policy (García et al., 2014). Therefore, and building on previous work, Barrera-Osorio et al. (2014) emphasise some school-level initiatives to increase school performance in the country. These include: i) assessment of schools and their members, ii) expanding the school day in public schools, iii) enhancing the skills of teachers, iii) increasing the administrative autonomy of schools, iv) cash incentives to headmasters of high performing (in test scores) schools and v) improving schools' access to public resources. The use of statistical data and regression models to verify the correlations that support those conclusions helps to understand, within the logic of the economics of education, the rationale behind these prescriptions. However, the contrasting of such conclusions with additional empirical data, and with other types of explanations of those mechanisms behind educational indicators, will unveil how the panorama depicted by these analytical exercises is, in the best of cases, a partial one.

¹⁷ According to Liu (2014), 'the intra-class correlation portrays how similar or correlated the observations within the same group or school are. The more similar the students are within the schools; the more variability lies between the schools' (p. 108). In relative terms, if one country has an intra-class correlation of 30% and a second one has one of 20%, then the first one exposes a case in which schools vary more widely in the production of educational outcomes (or are more unequal).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

<i>Variable Name</i>	2012			2013			Range
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
Score (mean maths and language)	548,730	46.37	8.14	547,962	46.32	8.01	0 - 116
Income 1	548,522	.31	.46	547,948	.30	.46	0 - 1
Income 2	548,522	.43	.50	547,948	.43	.50	0 - 1
Income 3	548,522	.14	.34	547,948	.14	.35	0 - 1
Income 4	548,522	.06	.25	547,948	.07	.25	0 - 1
Income 5	548,522	.02	.15	547,948	.02	.15	0 - 1
Income 6	548,522	.013	.11	547,948	.01	.11	0 - 1
Income 7	548,522	.016	.12	547,948	.02	.13	0 - 1
Man	548,640	.46	.50	547,960	.46	.50	0 - 1
Age Student	548,730	16.84	1.50	547,962	16.88	1.44	15 - 25
Either father or mother has a professional degree	548,730	.14	.34	547,962	.15	.35	0 - 1
Either father or mother has a high school degree	548,730	.53	.50	547,962	.55	.50	0 - 1
Computer with internet access	548,730	.44	.50	547,962	.48	.50	0 - 1
Urban Student	54,8500	.79	.41	38,647	.84	.36	0 - 1
Household size	548,522	4.82	1.80	547,948	4.74	1.73	1 - 12
Full time school	548,730	.20	.40	547,962	.21	.40	0 - 1
Private School	548,730	.28	.45	547,962	.28	.45	0 - 1
Mix School	548,730	.94	.24	547,962	.94	.24	0 - 1
Bilingual School	465,945	.02	.14	465,012	.02	.14	0 - 1
Pupils Schools (lagged)	403,654	93.05	95.16	365,013	93.35	94.30	1 - 1,037
Urban Students in school (lagged)	399,653	.79	.31	361,369	.79	.32	0 - 1
Mean income students in school (lagged)	402,934	2.18	.94	364,031	2.17	.92	1 - 7
Students school that work (lagged)	402,874	.09	.15	363,930	.09	.15	0 - 1
Tuition school (lagged)	402,974	1.73	1.40	363,971	1.69	1.38	1 - 6
Investment education quality in municipality (lagged)	381,692	1.05	0.88	335,509	1.96	36.64	.20 - 4,629.97
Teachers quality in municipality (lagged)	381,489	.64	.16	332,593	.83	.20	.05 - 1
Students-teacher ratio in municipality (lagged)	381,692	28.35	4.96	335,509	262.91	3.97	11.24 - 49.92
Room-per student (m2) in municipality (lagged)	381,692	1.26	.92	335,509	1.35	1.07	.25 - 17.14
Total schools in municipality (lagged)	410,903	361.22	550.00	374,174	292.91	462.74	1 - 1237
Index of municipal performance (lagged)	410,336	65.67	13.52	373,437	75.64	9.54	4.78 - 91.9
Municipal free appointed public servants that continued in their position (lagged)	365,791	.87	.12	325,342	.87	.18	0 - 1
Municipal professional public servants (lagged)	369,180	.92	.16	324,349	.94	.16	0 - 1
Municipal homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants (lagged)	410,903	31.95	25.57	373,968	30.33	24.80	0 - 221.14
Municipal forced displacement expulsion rate per 100,000 inhabitants (lagged)	410,903	209.78	668.54	369,411	119.16	576.25	0 - 29,623.7
Municipal kidnapping rate per 100,000 inhabitants (lagged)	410,903	.58	2.33	373,968	.34	1.48	0 - 50.67
Total population of municipality	410,917	1,814.132	2,843,334	374,320	1,829,293	2,879,601	1,184 - 7,674,366

Source: author's calculations using data from ICFES, DNP, DANE and Vicepresidencia de la República. All monetary units are in Colombian pesos from 2013. The selection criteria for these years were the availability of information to build the best possible data set accounting for different levels of the model (individual, school and municipality).

Table 2. MLM estimates

<i>Variable name</i>	2012			2013		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
Income 2 = 1	0.460*** (0.0255)	0.435*** (0.0355)	0.480*** (0.0356)	0.449*** (0.0249)	0.398*** (0.0376)	0.446*** (0.0377)
Income 3 = 1	1.094*** (0.0358)	0.953*** (0.0476)	1.075*** (0.0477)	0.967*** (0.0343)	0.854*** (0.0496)	0.966*** (0.0497)
Income 4 = 1	1.917*** (0.0479)	1.607*** (0.0617)	1.906*** (0.0615)	1.816*** (0.0456)	1.497*** (0.0642)	1.758*** (0.0641)
Income 5 = 1	2.630*** (0.0729)	1.983*** (0.0903)	2.519*** (0.0898)	2.477*** (0.0689)	2.010*** (0.0954)	2.501*** (0.0950)
Income 6 = 1	3.275*** (0.0939)	2.370*** (0.115)	3.124*** (0.114)	3.273*** (0.0904)	2.505*** (0.126)	3.213*** (0.125)
Income 7 = 1	4.322*** (0.100)	3.042*** (0.124)	4.092*** (0.122)	4.083*** (0.0963)	2.947*** (0.137)	3.974*** (0.136)
Man = 1	1.575*** (0.0187)	1.912*** (0.0259)	1.897*** (0.0260)	1.717*** (0.0181)	2.046*** (0.0273)	2.030*** (0.0274)
Age Student	-0.643*** (0.00700)	-0.884*** (0.0113)	-0.881*** (0.0113)	-0.558*** (0.00704)	-0.786*** (0.0123)	-0.785*** (0.0124)
Either father or mother has a professional degree = 1	1.386*** (0.0326)	1.316*** (0.0414)	1.439*** (0.0414)	1.349*** (0.0311)	1.231*** (0.0433)	1.346*** (0.0432)
Either father or mother has a high school degree = 1	0.911*** (0.0218)	0.861*** (0.0298)	0.899*** (0.0298)	0.914*** (0.0214)	0.886*** (0.0316)	0.930*** (0.0317)
Computer with internet access = 1	0.444*** (0.0233)	0.317*** (0.0312)	0.363*** (0.0312)	0.458*** (0.0228)	0.379*** (0.0331)	0.422*** (0.0332)
Urban Student = 1	0.736*** (0.0318)	0.774*** (0.0436)	0.843*** (0.0429)			
Household size	-0.101*** (0.00522)	-0.0935*** (0.00732)	-0.105*** (0.00733)	-0.122*** (0.00525)	-0.121*** (0.00805)	-0.131*** (0.00806)
Full time school = 1		1.060*** (0.0994)			1.194*** (0.111)	
Private School = 1		-1.224*** (0.126)			-1.505*** (0.142)	
Mix School = 1		-1.492*** (0.143)			-1.544*** (0.166)	
Bilingual School = 1		2.341*** (0.275)			2.501*** (0.291)	
Pupils Schools (lagged)		0.00436*** (0.000706)			0.00495*** (0.000778)	
Urban Students in school (lagged)		-0.406*** (0.130)			0.207 (0.140)	
Mean income students in school (lagged)		2.195*** (0.0755)			2.314*** (0.0847)	
Students school that work (lagged)		-1.873*** (0.261)			-2.260*** (0.307)	
Tuition school (lagged)		0.225*** (0.0531)			0.239*** (0.0604)	
Investment education quality in municipality (lagged)		-0.262*** (0.0720)			-0.000910 (0.00196)	
Teachers quality in municipality (lagged)		0.887*** (0.336)			0.803** (0.332)	
Students-teacher ratio in municipality (lagged)		-0.0358*** (0.0115)			-0.0607*** (0.0164)	

<i>Variable name</i>	2012			2013		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
Room-per student (m2) in municipality (lagged)		0.233*** (0.0504)			0.0898* (0.0494)	
Total schools in municipality (lagged)		-0.00870 (0.00615)			0.0157 (0.0101)	
Index of municipal performance (lagged)		0.0398*** (0.00642)			0.0254*** (0.00872)	
Municipal free appointed public servants that continued in their position (lagged)		0.0687 (0.324)			0.394 (0.409)	
Municipal professional public servants (lagged)		0.436 (0.397)			0.284 (0.442)	
Municipal homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants (lagged)		-0.00409* (0.00244)			-0.00337 (0.00266)	
Municipal forced displacement expulsion rate per 100,000 inhabitants (lagged)		9.38e-05 (9.13e-05)			-9.10e-05 (6.87e-05)	
Municipal kidnapping rate per 100,000 inhabitants (lagged)		0.0208 (0.0172)			-0.0390 (0.0279)	
Total population of municipality		1.58e-06 (1.21e-06)			-2.55e-06 (1.60e-06)	
Constant	53.64*** (0.139)	53.50*** (0.709)	58.39*** (0.213)	52.51*** (0.139)	52.50*** (0.879)	57.26*** (0.232)
Intra-class correlation in schools (empty model)						
<i>With individual and school-level</i>	0.33			0.35		
<i>With individual, school and municipal level</i>	0.27			0.28		
R2	0.16	0.22	0.12	0.16	0.20	0.09
Observations	547,875	303,619	303,619	547,629	262,364	262,364
Number of groups	1,105	810	810	1,096	747	747

Standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note: The R2 statistic is computed using Bickel (2007). Models 3 in each year act as a robustness check of results, in addressing problems with the loss of data when adding variables from upper levels of the model. Given that the coefficients of models 1 (the whole sample) and 3 (the same sample as in model 2) are relatively the same, one can argue that model 2 was not affected by the loss of data (when adding control variables)

1.3.2. *Theories of social reproduction (non-mainstream research)*

Some researchers propose historical accounts to explore the roots of educational inequalities¹⁸. These accounts transcend the actualism of statistical analysis (the focus in today's panorama) and engage in an exploration of the past to try to understand contemporary educational dynamics. These

¹⁸ The literature from alternative traditions in educational research is notoriously more scarce than the economics of education. The authors of the selected studies are, however, local scholars with important reputations in the field.

types of exercises are harder to replicate given the nature of the type of data (an interpretation of history) on which they relied. Therefore, to analyse this strand of the literature using its own logic, it is fruitful to quote specific excerpts from relevant scholarly work (which is scarce, compared to the mainstream statistical viewpoint). Cajiao (2004; 2014), for instance, highlights the absence of proper structural considerations (i.e. the heritage from colonial times of educational segregation), to acknowledge the way in which policies tend to reproduce class consciousness over time:

Colombia chose, since the beginning of the Republic an intensely segregated education system, in which Grenadine elites secured a model that would allow them to preserve privileges and power through a system of private education highly differentiated from the public education that was delivered (...) to the rest of the population (...). [B]ehind curricula, studying plans, the training of teachers and access policies, there is something deeper that is the education of desire, class-consciousness and the way of becoming part of the social pyramid (Cajiao, 2014 p. 28. *Translated quotation*).

Within a similar tradition, other scholars have approached this debate using hermeneutic-based accounts, with which they see education policy as the result of dominant discourses that promote international agendas and privilege market-based reforms. Montoya-Vargas' (2014) extensive review of the literature of curriculum research in Colombia provides some examples of these types of work. Here she comments, particularly, on one influential study from the Pedagogy and Curriculum group (Aristizábal, 2008) of Cauca University:

These authors apply a historic and hermeneutic approach to the study of 150 documents (...) produced between 1960 and 1975 (...) to confirm the prevalence of a technical approach and the lack of a critical perspective about the curriculum in Colombia. The group restates the origins of the curriculum as a utilitarian, market oriented control and power device imposed by international agencies, dominated by the USA through the Ministry of Education to control education ideologically (...) and to disempower teachers (Montoya-Vargas, 2014, p. 139)

Within their own (ontological and epistemological) logic, these types of studies shed light on some issues that are still not clear - or have not been prioritised - in mainstream SE research. One of them would be a possible linkage of persistent school failure with the historical elitist class configurations of Colombian society. At the same time, the introduction of the role of local and transnational elites elucidates the belonging of the Colombian education policy to a broader (and translational) global education system, implying restrictions and limitations to moving into different policy directions. Then again, the next task in this first analytical exercise consists of contrasting such views (or explanations) with empirical data, and against the possible explanations quoted here. As schools have hardly changed over time, it is important to question the extent to which, at least in the discursive level, these alternatives to the mainstream offer more valuable insights to inform policymakers about the specific challenges of education in the country.

1.4. Valuing the relevance of the literature: introducing Critical Realism

At this point, it is possible to make some general observations about the way both mainstream and non-mainstream scholars make sense (or try to explain) documented regularities in secondary education in Colombia. In the case of mainstream school effectiveness research (from the economics of education), the scholarly work is illustrative of important correlations between school input characteristics (i.e. quality of teaching) and outputs (i.e. test scores). Little is said, however, about persistence failure of policy interventions in fostering radical transformations in schools (Montoya-Vargas, 2014)¹⁹. As a matter of fact, problems of persistence in this tradition (the why question) are usually referred to as a (simple) matter of endurance of such correlations (i.e. between teachers' skills and individual school performance) across time [see, for instance, García et al.] (2015).

In the case of non-mainstream literature, scholars are more explicit in addressing problems of persistence, but their theoretical efforts tend to overlook additional empirical data that imply caveats in their theories. For instance, the social reproduction literature suggests that some students are condemned to go to *bad* schools, or, for instance, institutions that socialise them into habits of poor performers. However, such theories fail to account for cases in which test scores in some regions have also improved (García et al., 2015) - some *individuals* do break out (Demain, 2003, p. 136) - and may overlook the active roles of teachers in resisting neoliberal curricula (Gindin & Finger, 2013). Similarly, when bringing in elements of international policy trends, Vanegas (2003) discusses that '[m]any of the international influences [in education] are appropriated by Colombian people, accepted, admired, reproduced' (p. 227). In this way she argues that it is problematic to refer to *imposition* when conceptualising north-south relations in shaping local education policies.

In any case, is this simply a matter of omitted variables? Will the addition of new descriptive data to previous work increase the explanatory power of economic or current sociological theories to explain educational phenomena in Colombia? ²⁰ The answer is not that simple. Going back to Glewwe et al.'s (2013) comparative survey of educational research, quoted in the Introduction of this document, the lack of cumulative knowledge on why schools fail to produce better results scales up to a global level (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2016). It is then plausible to think that the variance

¹⁹ Documentary evidence supports this statement., in the sense that today's policy recipes are hardly innovative. For instance, the 2006 Decennial Educational Plan already included a chapter on the professional development, dignity and training of teachers and school managers. The Educational Sectorial Plan 2006-2010 prescribes the need to strengthen the system of quality assurance, by focussing on basic standards of competencies, the evaluation of students, teachers, managers and institutions, and institutional (managerial) improvement (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2012). Barrera-Osorio's (2005) historical analysis on education policies between 1957 and 2004 concluded, more than a decade ago, that schools with a low average score should receive a shock improvement in infrastructure, teacher training, and educational and administrative support. Likewise, it is not the first time that scholars refer to the importance of expanding the school day (Barrera-Osorio, Maldonado, & Rodriguez, 2014). Montoya-Vargas (2014) refers to this situation using the following statement: '[e]ach time the Ministry of Education wants to improve the quality of education, it goes back to the same old formula (...) and wonders why after years of these efforts, schools remain the same' (p. 139).

²⁰ Expert econometricians would argue that with more comprehensive data sets and more sophisticated estimation techniques it would be possible to increase the explanatory power of statistical models to study school effectiveness [for an example of this type of debate see St. John et al. (2013)].

in levels, and qualities, of available information - between countries - is uncorrelated with the production of *better* explanations (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Some scholars hence suggest shifting the question away from the (lack of) explanatory power of statistical models (Willmott R. , 2003; Scott, 2007) and sociological theories (Demain, 2003; Swartz, 2003; Wuisman, 2005) informing educational research. Such a shift implies migrating to meta-theoretical (i.e. ontologic, epistemic) debates, to analyse the coherence between the sets of interlocking principles informing scholarly work in education. This document draws on previous work in the philosophy of educational research (Willmott, 1999a; Clegg, 2005; Scott, 2007; Brown, 2009; Priestley & Miller, 2012; Archer, 2013; Edwards, 2014) to justify the adequacy of critical realism in informing this next step in the immanent critique. The rest of this section introduces the core ontological and epistemological elements of CR and sets the basis for engaging in a meta-theoretical critique of the academic work of Colombian scholars.

1.4.1. *The stratified ontology of the social world*

Ontology refers to the properties of the objects researchers ought to study. CR contends that social objects exist because of a 'set of relations between [their] components' (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 21). These specific forms, and the properties, of (social) objects, will depend on the specificities of those sets of properties and relations between their constitutive elements. Likewise, social objects can interact with other objects to become a component of a wider research object. So a school, for example, '[that comprises] individuals, social groupings (such as departments) (...) may be seen as a substratum of the wider educational system, and in turn the whole of society' (Priestley & Miller, 2012, p. 102).

This ontological understanding of social objects derives from Bhaskar's (1998) inquiry on the possibility of naturalism or the question of the extent to which *society can be studied in the same way as nature* (p. 1). That is, by no means, an attempt to equate the properties of the objects in social science to those in, for instance, physics - a conflation that is common in economics (Lewis, 2003). As Bhaskar (1998) himself concedes, '[s]uch a naturalism holds that it is possible to give an account of science under which (...) methods of both the natural and social sciences can fall. But it does not deny that there are significant differences in these methods, grounded in real differences in their subject-matters' (p. 3). Therefore, it is one thing to argue that naturalism helps to clarify how any causal claim in research ought to address the sets of relations between the constituents of social objects (Willmott R. , 1999a), and another to (misleadingly) claim that the tasks of social and natural scientists are identical.

Regarding commonalities (to both natural and social sciences), naturalism provides valuable understandings on how the objects come together to form other objects. The example of water is a canonical one in CR, arguing that one cannot observe this liquid and its constitutive elements at the same time (Willmott R. , 1999a). That means that hydrogen and oxygen, and their causal properties acting to create H₂O, ontologically pre-exist water. In the case of social objects, like a school, the set of relations (i.e. among teachers, students, parents) that give form to a specific type of school (i.e. a failing school) in a specific moment of time necessarily exist, therefore, in the past tense. CR endorses, hence, a stratified ontology by distinguishing the *actual* (perceived events) from

real (the specific set of relations) domains of reality (Bhaskar, 2008)²¹. The first observation will also imply that scientists who study water cannot identify its elements or its properties through solely empirical means. Water, which is, at certain temperatures, liquid, does not taste like either oxygen or hydrogen, and neither of these elements carries the properties to contain a fire. Consequently, '[one] cannot explain the power of water to extinguish fire by deriving it from the powers of its constituents' (Sayer, 1992, p. 119). This last consideration highlights two important ontological elements for researchers to consider. On the one hand, causal claims cannot be exhausted in the domain of the *actual* (i.e. the causes of poor school performance necessarily transcend the observations of events, such as the attitudes of teachers at schools). On the other hand, the properties of specific objects are not reducible to adding the properties of its constitutive elements (i.e. bad grades, explained as a linear function of bad teachers, lack of computers, etc.).

All of the above implies that researching the emergence of phenomena (i.e. the persistence of poor school performance), is equivalent to studying 'relations between the components of a higher level entity that makes them more than the sum of the parts' (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 21). Causal claims in science, therefore, ought to necessarily refer to the stratified and relational (not linear) emergence of social objects. Likewise, this notion of stratification 'rejects the idea (...) that [scientific] laws are empirical statements or statements about events' (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 52), meaning that explanatory theories (i.e. poor school performance) do not equate to mere empirical statements (i.e. teachers are bad).

1.4.2. *Epistemic and some methodological challenges in open systems*

Stratification and emergence both refer to the general ontological status of the reality the researcher is attempting to study. The last sub-section highlighted, however, that the above cannot serve to equate the activities of natural and social scientists. The notion of stratified emergence endorsed by CR implies that human beings are necessarily more complex entities (or objects) than atoms or molecules, or animals and trees²². Clearly, 'nature is not a woman (...) or a man, or an animal. It has no feelings, intentions or desires' (Collier, 1994, p. 34). The typologies of *closed* and *open* systems, as referred to by Bhaskar (1998), discloses the implications of this last crucial distinction:

For in the absence of spontaneously occurring, and given the impossibility of artificially creating, *closed systems*, the human sciences must confront the problem of the direct scientific study of phenomena that only ever manifest themselves in *open systems* (p. 23.
Emphasis added)

²¹ CR also differentiates between the domains of the empirical and the actual. This precision is not relevant in the current discussion.

²² Collier sustains that the natural world is not fundamentally different from the social one, but rather that they both exist in different ontological layers of reality. In his account "The relations between the more basic and less basic domains are one-way relations of inclusions: all animals are composed of chemical substances but not all chemical substances are part of animals, and so on (...) society, for instance, is rooted in biology and not in physics or chemistry, though it presupposes the reality of the world that physics and chemistry explain to us" (Collier, 1994, pp. 107, 116).

In natural sciences, experiments act as methodological devices to allow scientists to generate closed systems artificially. In this case, the role of the scientist is to apply procedures to ‘isolate one mechanism of nature from its effects of others, to see what that mechanism does on its own’ (Collier, 1994, p. 34). The notions of stratification and emergence held here demand that scientists manipulate certain conditions to have access to the reality they intend to study (i.e. the experiment of electrolysis to study water). However, doing experiments in (some) natural science settings has epistemic validity given that the properties of physical and chemical objects are fairly *qualitatively invariant* (Patomäki, 2003, p. 210) i.e. under certain (controlled) temperatures, water will always maintain its liquidity. Put in simpler terms, epistemologically speaking, in the world of natural sciences the endurance of patterns (such as those reproducing the liquidity of water), means that controlled statistical analysis helps in testing the existence of certain mechanisms, and even supports making predictions about the alternation of those patterns in time.

The leap from naturalism to the study of social objects represents, however, additional epistemic challenges. For instance, the same notions of stratification and emergence, and the complexities implied in the constitution of objects in higher strata (i.e. the social world) implies that it will be ultimately impossible to isolate mechanisms from the objects in which they converge. Social research happens, hence, in open systems where ‘events (...) are not invariably preceded or followed by any other constantly conjoined effect’ (Collier, 1994, p. 34). In opposition to the world of atoms and molecules, and based on the fact that humans are reflexive beings (Bhaskar, 1998), the objects of social research are necessarily qualitatively variant (Patomäki, 2003). Under such circumstances, tools such as measuring and contrasting indicators will neither ensure the possibility of testing the effect of mechanisms nor make (statistical) predictions. These tools are ill-equipped to account for, for instance, the qualitative variability of human subjectivity, without which it would be impossible to fully account for the emergence of objects in the social world (i.e. test scores might be partially explained because people pursue different goals in life).

The implications of researching open systems are expressed more clearly in the realm of methodology, understood as a reflection on research designs. Research designs in social research usually deliberate between inductive (i.e. empirical econometrics, grounded theory) or deductive inference strategies (mathematical modelling, qualitative content analysis). However, CR critiques pure forms of induction or deduction because these carry assumptions of system closure and, by extension, of flat (non-stratified) ontologies (Wuisman, 2005). Sayer’s (1992) critique of the *weaknesses of statistical-based causal analysis* is illustrative of this last point. Quoting this author, ‘[t]he independent variables used to *explain* variation in the dependent variable of a multiple regression equation are supposed to be independent [not internally related] of one another and their combined effects purely additive [not stratified]’ (p. 197).

The discussion on proper research methodologies is central to Chapter Two of this document. For the time being, the goal of the remainder of this Chapter is to debate the relevance of current research practices in education in Colombia. The last section of the Chapter elaborates upon the ontological notions of CR presented above (stratified emergence and open systems), and sees them as requirements of good scientific practices (Clegg, 2005) – in order to value the relevance of the meta-theoretical foundations of mainstream and non-mainstream school effectiveness research.

1.5. A critical assessment of educational research Colombia

1.5.1. *Empiricism and causality in closed systems*

The critical assessment of scholarly work begins by focusing on a meta-theoretical review of the mainstream tradition in school effectiveness research in Colombia. The assessment is carried out by first identifying core methodological claims in recently published academic research, from which to unpack, using CR, ontological elements informing this type of research. The following excerpts represent three statements that reflect the rationale of this quantitative tradition:

- i. *Teachers are the most important determinant in the learning of students (...) impact evaluations of many other alternative interventions (...) show that their effectiveness depends on the training of teachers* (García et al., 2014, pp. 89, 105. Translated quotation).²³
- ii. *A high proportion of studies have employed a single-level methodology, which is inappropriate to account for the nested nature of students within schools. Our study takes into account the nested structure of the data and models the impact of school-level factors above and beyond family characteristics* (Rangel & Lleras, 2010).
- iii. *Our study does not emphasise the socio-economic dimension [of households]. (...) [T]he spectrum to modify the variables of the socio-economic context is limited from the perspective of educational policy* (García et al., 2014, p. 91. Translated quotation).

What immediately jumps out by examining these statements (henceforth, *i*, *ii* and *iii*) is that quantitative researchers endorse notions of causality that are only valid in closed systems. As a matter of fact, the basis of causal analysis in econometrics is a purposive attempt to isolate variables statistically. That is the message that Wooldridge (2002) conveys to the readers of his classic textbook when he writes that ‘holding all other (relevant) factors fixed (...) is at the crux of establishing a causal relationship’ (p. 3). Without assuming system closure, researchers would not be able to defend causal arguments such as the identification of *the most important determinant in the learning (i)* or justify focusing only on some (relevant) variables (*ii and iii*).

Methodological claims in mainstream research also imply ‘that people’s actions combine mechanically to produce an aggregate outcome that is no more than an additive sum of their individual behaviours’ (Lewis, 2003, p. 185). Researchers use econometric models to estimate *education production functions*, where certain outputs (i.e. test scores) represent linear additions of (assumed to be) relevant inputs (i.e. teacher’s skills, the size of classrooms, etc.) (*i, ii, iii*). Clearly, such practice overlooks notions of stratification (i.e. models include only empirical data or actual events) and stratified emergence (i.e. the whole, for instance school performance, is a result of a linear relationship between variables). Consequently - and while (*ii*) appears to unveil a type of stratification (working with different *levels* of data) - mainstream school effectiveness research endorses a flat (or non-stratified) ontology. Said differently, statistical models to study educational dynamics have a relevant role in exploring contingent correlations in the realm of actual events but

²³ This study, also known as The Compartir Report, is, perhaps, the most influential study informing policy debates in the country today (Parra J., 2015)

have virtually nothing to say about the process (or the why question) of emergence behind the correlation of educational indicators.

In sum, what this critique contends is that the core methodological assumptions of research in the economics of education, as represented in the work of Colombian scholars, limits the possibilities of this first tradition in establishing causal relationships (to answer *why* questions) in educational research. These ontological *limitations* help (at least partially) to understand the fixation of scholars in some debates (interventions in schools) and not others (interventions in other sectors of society). The focus of their work, which consists of making inductive inferences from empirical data, overemphasises the role of today (actual, and statistically robust relationships) and treats the past as epiphenomena. The problem is, however, that according to CR, the efficacious causes of actual events necessarily pre-exist them.

1.5.2. *Non-mainstream approaches and the persistence of flat ontologies*

Similarly, the assessment of the meta-theoretical assumptions of non-mainstream research departs from identifying core methodological principles endorsed by scholars. The two selected statements are:

- iv. *It is crucial to account, with a general perspective, for the evolution of the role of society vis-à-vis the processes to socially incorporate new generations in cultural codes, allowing children and young people to acquire tools to exercise a productive role in their communities. Such a historical perspective allows for the comprehension of the evolution of the social perception of education, and the role that is played in different moments, by social organisations and the state* (Cajiao, 2004, p. 32. Translated quotation).
- v. *Current conditions in which national educational reform policies develop should be seen with a historical perspective (...). The arrival of curriculum theory in the country was the most important and most influential event [of the second half of the XXth century] (...) because it marked a tendency (...), which is expressed today in various forms and in various languages, maintaining its fundamental spirit through two key concepts: efficiency and effectiveness* (Aristizábal, 2012, p. 29. Translated quotation).

It is relevant to say that non-mainstream scholars represent different epistemic schools. Cajiao's work, on the one hand, relies on the methodological foundations of Bowles and Gintis's (2002; 2011) work, which scholars situate in the neo-Marxist (or structuralist) tradition in the sociology of education (Field, 1977; Heyns, 1978; Demain, 2003; Swartz, 2003). Similarly to Cajiao's focus in studying contesting ways in which people perceive and act upon education, Bowles and Gintis's work departs from 'Marx's observation that fundamental social change occurs only when evident possibilities for progress are held in check by a set of anachronistic social arrangements' (2011, p. 15)²⁴. Aristizábal's work, on the other hand, explicitly situates itself within hermeneutics, hence

²⁴ The similarity between both authors is also visible in way they present their findings. Cajiao's (2014) view that schools socialize children to the 'way of becoming part of the social pyramid' (p. 28. Translated quotation), echoes Bowles and

focusing broadly in tracing various *forms* and *languages*, through which curricular design privileges particular sets of principles (Zeeman, et al. 2002).

That being said, there are some (at least) potential commonalities between (iv) and (v) with elements of CR. For instance, both statements put history first. Conversely, both statements seem to place epistemic value on the role of subjectivity (i.e. perception, the use of language) in the understanding of complex human processes. Non-mainstream research, therefore, makes a clear effort to introduce politics (i.e. conflict, different interpretations) into a debate that mainstream strands consider more to be a matter of technicalities (i.e. measurement errors) (Brown, 2009). In the view of the non-mainstream strand in educational research, education is hence best understood as ‘a social and historical practice that involves power relations but that can be none the less a training exercise in the paradoxes of freedom’ (Dussel, 2010, p. 30)

Incongruences between statements (iv) and (v), and CR emerge, however, when expressing them in ontological terms. The critiques of other sociologists of education to these traditions help in elucidating elements of their ontologies. In the first case (iv), Demain (2003), for example, highlights the deterministic essence of neo-Marxist views on education, where social reproduction acts ‘as the necessary end of the processes of education’ (p. 129). Likewise, scholars contend the lack of human reflexivity in Bowles and Ginti’s framework, as if agents were all passive compliers of their class roles (Field, 1977; Heyns, 1978; Archer, 1993; Swartz, 2003). This type of *monism*, using Sayer’s (1998) expression, ‘[fails] to grasp the complexities of the concrete’ and ‘seriously underestimates the degree of internal differentiation and flexibility in (...) [social] objects’ (p. 140). In the case of hermeneutics, it is worth clarifying that scholars using text analysis explicitly distance themselves from ‘explaining the world and making truth claims’ (Zeeman, et al. 2002, p. 99), to focus on how particular conceptions of truth dominate public discourses in education (Wuisman, 2005). What this last quote reflects is, hence, a rejection of the existence of underlying social relations that, according to Joseph (2004), signifies a ‘refusal to see a hierarchy of social institutions and in particular [to] downplaying of the role of the state’ (p. 162). Consequently, *statement (v)* entails also a deterministic view (or ontology) of education, which helps to understand, for instance, Aristizábal’s (2008; 2012) emphasis on episodes of *imposition*, and not on those of *resistance* [like in Vanegas (2003)].

Summing up, non-mainstream Colombian scholars endorse methodologies that, given their deterministic account of reality, praise ontologies of closed social systems (as if Y is always resultant of X). Moreover, by overlooking the role of human subjectivity (in a non-deterministic fashion), neither of these views provides a stratified account of emergence (in the case of hermeneutics, there is a purposive attempt not to do so)²⁵. Therefore, while these approaches potentially bring relevant elements into the debate that mainstream researchers overlook (i.e. history, social relations), they

Ginti’s (2002) argument that ‘schools prepare people for adult work rules by socializing people to function well and without complaint in the hierarchica structure of the modern corporation’ (p. 1).

²⁵ In the case of structuralism, Sayer (1998) is explicit in pointing out how determinism implies that reality is taken as given (i.e. observed, transparent, non-stratified): ‘what Marxism may take as a *given* (...) may be the prime object of study for another subject working upon a different stratum’ (p. 131)

enunciate researching elements that, however, lose their explanatory power once they are put into practice.

1.6. Conclusion

Many of the limitations in the research on education carried out by Colombian scholars lie in their tendency to work under the assumptions of closed systems and non-stratified ontologies. That is the case even for scholars who differentiate themselves in their epistemic stands and the topics on which they focus. Non-mainstream researchers, for instance, posit epistemic value to some elements (i.e. subjectivity) that CR conceives as relevant to building causal claims on the emergence of educational phenomena. However, many of these elements are simply enunciated, but not sufficiently examined through methodologies that escape from the limitations of assuming closed systems.

What are the alternatives? Chapter Two focuses on that reflection. However, anticipating that debate, the two main ontological elements discussed in this Chapter establish at least two basic elements or principles of more promising scientific research paths. One of them is the need to focus on the reflexivity of social human beings. This task is at the heart of CR (Clegg, 2005); given that the causal properties of social structures work through people, studying human agency is the *sine qua non* for successfully uncovering generative mechanisms explaining persistence or change. However, given the ontology of stratification, reflexivity necessarily happens in a pre-existent context, implying with it the need to study the properties of social structures that condition reflexive action.

Chapter Two: Structure and agency and analytical dualism: introducing the elements for a Domain-Specific Metatheory ²⁶

Society is that which nobody wants, in the form in which they encounter it, for it is an unintended consequence. Its constitution could be expressed as a riddle: what is it that depends on human intentionality but never conforms to their intentions? What is it that relies upon people's concepts but which they never fully know? What is it that depends upon action but never corresponds to the actions of even the most powerful? What is it that has no form without us, yet which forms us as we seek its transformation? And what is it that never satisfies the precise designs of anyone yet because of this always motivates its attempted reconstitution? To recognise the unique kind of reality with which we are dealing in this 'vexatious fact of society' is to acknowledge the difficulty of the theoretical enterprise but also the impossibility of taking analogical short-cuts

(...)

Social theory has to be useful and usable: it is not an end in itself. The vexatious fact of society has to be tackled in theory and/or practice. These two tasks cannot be separated, for were practical utility to be the sole criterion we would commit ourselves to instrumentalism - to working with theoretically ungrounded rules of thumb. Conversely, a purely theoretical taming of the vexing beast may give a warm inner glow of ontological rectitude but is cold comfort to practical social analysts. They want a user-friendly tool kit and although it cannot come pocket-sized with an easy reference manual, customer services have every right to complain when handed an unwieldy device without any instructions on the assumption that if they handle it sufficiently this will somehow sensitize them to something.

Archer (1995, pp. 135, 165)

2.1. Introduction

Chapter One of the dissertation set CR as its departing ontology. It also highlighted some elements upon which it is possible to open a discussion around the meaning of scientific (social) research and concludes by arguing for the need to deploy research methodologies that study stratified emergent social processes behind observable educational outcomes. That Chapter also stated, but did not delve into, the preference of realist scholars for retroductive research. In that regard, citing Danermark et al. (2002) helps to start elucidating further methodological implications of CR for applied research:

An overall aim in social science research is to explain events and processes. To explain something implies (from the perspective of critical realism) first describing and conceptualizing the properties and causal mechanisms generating and enabling events,

²⁶ An article version of part of this chapter is published in the Colombian top-ranked indexed journal *Sociedad y Economía*. The contents also appear in a Colombian indexed journal (not a top one) - *GiST Education and Learning Research Journal*.

making things happen (...), and then describing how different mechanisms manifest themselves under specific conditions. This kind of investigation requires a methodological approach based on abduction and retroduction, and breaking with the so-called Popper–Hempel model [PHM] of scientific explanations (p. 74)

According to these last authors, the PHM represents a classic, and still dominant, mode of social inquiry. It resembles, one can argue, Bunge’s (2011) notion of an *arbitrary* research project. The steps are ‘[c]hoice of background knowledge - statement of problem(s) - tentative solution (...) - run of empirical tests (...) - evaluation of test results - eventual correction of any of the preceding steps, and new problems posed by the finding’ (p. 413). From the discussion in the first chapter of the document, one can immediately problematise that mode of reasoning as it most likely responds to assumptions of system closure and modes of non-relational and stratified emergence. That is the case of dominant frameworks informing SE research (Willmott, 2003).

This second chapter aims to present Archer’s (1995) Morphogenetic approach as a Domain-Specific Meta-Theory (DSMT)²⁷ to scientifically ground SE studies. Porpora (2013) was quoted in the Introduction of the dissertation to argue about the adequacy of the MGA to inform realist grounded research, as it illustrates quite clearly many of the tenets of CR. Bhaskar (2016) himself recognised this approach as the extension of the transformation model of social activity (TMSA) that he presents as a proposal to study society. Using his words, in fact ‘the [MGA] can be regarded as an elaboration of the ontology of the TMSA’ (p. 51)²⁸. Key to sustaining the latter vis-à-vis other proposals to operationalise CR, lies in Archer’s proposition to introduce time to distinguish between diachronic and synchronic movements in the interplay between structure and agency. That is not to say that this last proposal is unique (even in the CR community) in employing historical analysis. Nonetheless, part of Archer’s innovation is that ‘even those who give time a relevant position in their theory (...) do not (...) operate theoretically with it’ (Maccarini, 2013, p. 46), as she explicitly does.

In the next section, the Chapter provides some relevant insights into the discussion confronting induction/deduction with retroductive inference logics in social research, all of which are basic to setting the premises and the use of the DSMT informing this dissertation. Once such a distinction

²⁷ Compared to the first reference to this concept in the introduction of the dissertation, the notion of a metatheory, and not simply a theory, is made now explicit (while maintaining the same acronym to avoid unnecessary confusions in the terminology). Coining the terms metatheory and simply theory, makes explicit the departure from linear ways of social theorising, to refer to particular (emergent, nonlinear, relational) ways of conceptualisation.

²⁸ To be fairer to Archer, it would be more accurate to say that her MGA *fleshes out* the TMSA, at the same time as it suggests ontological adjustments to it. As she discusses it in her 1995 book, ‘[t]he TMSA is the generous under-labouring of a philosopher who has actually dug beyond disciplinary bounds: the [MGA] approach is produced by a working sociologist, recognizing the obligation to go deeper into precision tooling to supply a social theory which is pre-eminently usable. Thus the [MGA] approach seeks to go further than providing *a clear criterion of historically significant events*: it attempts not merely to identify but also to unpack. Thus there is yet more fine-grained work to be done on the conceptualization of structural conditioning, on the specification of how structural influences are transmitted (as reasons not hydraulics) to particular agents in determinate positions and situations (the who, the when and the where), and on the strategic combinations which result in morphogenesis rather than morphostasis (which outcome)’ (Archer, 1995, p. 161. *Original emphases*).

is made clear, it will be easier to make the jump from ontology and epistemology to methodology, safeguarding the coherence between these three levels. All these concepts converge into the presentation of the general research design of the project (in the last section), which includes details on methods of collecting and making sense of field data.

2.2. The need for abduction and retroduction

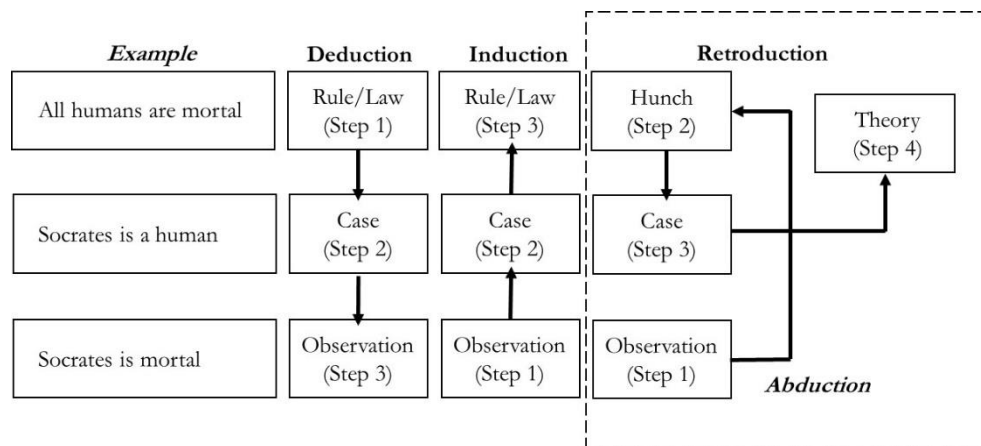
Contrary to widespread belief, Bunge (2011) declares, ‘the scientific method does not exclude speculation: it only disciplines imagination’ (p. 413). That is also true in the realm of the *hard sciences*²⁹. In fact, one of the most important contributions of Bhaskar’s (2008) *Realist Theory Science* was to assert how any scientific endeavour requires the deployment of social imagination. Here he writes that ‘it is through our manipulative powers that, by interfering with the course of nature [that] are able to check the reality and study the operation of the hypothetical generative mechanisms that in the *scientific imagination* we picture as responsible for their behaviour’ (p. 233. *Emphasis added*).

Danermark et al. (2002) resort to Otto Loewi’s scientific endeavour to study the human nervous system to illustrate this last point. It was the observation that there was a differentiated effect in the acting of the nervous system in human organs that lead the scientist to challenge the wisdom of that time that pointed out the existence of a homogenous electric impulse acting inside the human body. Loewi’s knowledge of pharmaceuticals allowed him to imagine that, given that drugs have similar effects on muscles and other organs, the theory of electric impulses needed to be complemented with one which included the possibility of the existence of certain chemical substances found in nerve terminals. After years of reflection - it took Loewi seventeen years to figure it out - the German scientist came with a strategy to test his hypothesis. By experimenting with frog hearts, he poured the substance that was secreted by *heart A* after receiving an electric impulse (with a battery) over *heart B*, which had had its nerves previously removed and did not receive such an impulse. That way he managed to test his theory: ‘It is (...) easy to imagine the joy of discovery that Loewi felt when its pace was reduced, as if the vagus nerve it no longer possessed had been stimulated. He could now conclude that the chemical substance operated through the muscle[s]’ (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002, p. 19).

The logic of scientific discovery illustrated in the previous example, among many other’s [for more examples see Collier (1994)], unveils many of the ontological and epistemological principles in CR (see Chapter One), and illustrates its critique of the logic of induction and deduction informing largely social research. Figure 1 is an adaption of Wuisman’s (2005) three forms of inferential logics: deduction, induction and retroduction. In its original version, the scheme focused upon abduction, leaving the retroductive logic implied as part of the latter. In this new version of that original comparison, retroduction and abduction, both to be defined in the next paragraphs, act in a complementary manner to each other.

²⁹ As one the author of a periodical note for the BBC writes (2013), ‘Albert Einstein famously said: *Imagination is more important than knowledge*. They’re both important, says physicist and Nobel Prize recipient Frank Wilczek, but knowledge without imagination is barren. Take his subject of theoretical physics. As Wilczek says a lot of what you do is to try to understand Mother Nature’s mind and her sense of beauty to see how the laws of physics could be more beautiful’.

Figure 2. Different inferential logics



Source: adapted from Wuisman (2005)

Figure 2, in its original form, makes use of the example of Socrates, and his humanity, to illustrate the whole discussion. Firstly, deduction implies departing from one general proposition (i.e. all humans are mortal) and proceeds to validate or not that rule/law with empirical data. In this simplified case, the use of sensorial data (i.e. the observation that Socrates was human) suffices to arrive at an answer to the original inquiry (i.e. indeed, Socrates is mortal). This type of reasoning is common in disciplines such as economics, where sets of axioms (i.e. about the preferences of consumers and producers) allow scholars to deduce some behavioural traits and predict situations of market equilibria (Lawson T. , 1997; 2012; Lewis, 2003; Watson, 2005). That would also be the case in some forms of qualitative thematic analysis, where themes to classify qualitative data emerge from existent theories and act as a way of verifying the extent to which they apply to make interpretations of the information.

Induction implies going in the opposite direction - the assumption is that it is possible to observe empirical data in such a systematic manner that it will allow making conclusions on the operation of more general laws. In Figure 1, for instance, observing that Socrates is both a mortal - he could not survive a poisonous beverage of hemlock - and human, allows the conclusion that all humans are mortal. In disciplines such as economics, sociology and political science, induction is the guiding inferential logic of econometric analysis. In SE research, for example, the observation of a strong statistical relationship between teaching skills and test scores allows researchers to induce that ‘the main driver of the variation in student learning at school is the quality of the teachers’ (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p. 12). Again, inductive logics are not exclusive to quantitative research. Induction is key, for instance, to Grounded Theory, its founding principle being the possibility to build a theory out of a detached (from any preconceived theoretical framework) analysis of primary empirical data (Glaser & Strauss, 2006).

Some implications that derive from the ontological and epistemological discussion in Chapter One serve to problematise both deduction and induction as the primary inferential logics guiding social research. The ontology of open systems and the notion of the stratified social emergence of phenomena implies that causal research ought to transcend linear thinking (in the form $A \rightarrow B$)

and flat ontologies (deducting or inducing from observation implies working only in the realm of actual events). More generally, both induction and deduction entail working under levels of certainty that are hard to sustain when the object of inquiry is a society and its parts. As Wuisman (2005) elegantly puts it:

It is commonly understood that deduction is the mode of inference which proceeds from the general (rule or law) to the particular (result or observation). This implies that the content of the conclusion is always the same or than that of the premises. In addition, a valid deduction is truth-conserving. If the rule or law is really true, then the conclusion must by necessity be true too. Where that rule or law comes from in the first place remains unspecified. Induction is commonly taken as proceeding in the opposite direction, from the particular (result or observation) to the general (rule or law). In contrast to deduction, the content of the conclusion reached by induction is bigger than that of the premises. That means that induction is content-increasing, but, in contrast to deduction, it is not truth-conserving. The validity of its conclusion cannot be proved with absolute certainty. In order for an inductive inference to be valid, it is logically necessary that the general rule or law is known beforehand as a hypothesis. Induction can only be used to validate that previously hypothesized general rule or law. This comparison of deduction and induction shows that *in the case of deduction and induction the origin of the hypothesis remains a complete mystery*. Deduction and induction are not capable of explaining this. It is precisely at this point that [retroduction and] abduction [step] in (pp. 381-382. *Emphasis added*).

Back to Figure 1, a third proposal to ground causal research is to depart from observation and delve into possible causal explanations. Observing that Socrates is mortal (after all, he died) provides evidence to inform hunch hypotheses about the possibility that the philosopher was a human being (this example might be over simplistic and self-evident, but still serves to illustrate the discussion). All preliminary ideas about humanity might emerge from the researcher's initial interpretations of what being human means, but this needs to be tested by referring to the specific case being studied (i.e. Socrates as a human). However, this process is not linear, as in the cases of pure deduction or induction, nor is it conclusive by the mere act of jumping from Step 2 to Step 3. The openness of human social systems implies that researchers will not be able to eliminate all uncertainty from their explanations, and hence, they can only arrive at a plausible theory about the causes of Socrates' mortality.

The process described above imply mixing abductive and retroductive logics of research, representing the essence of realist methodology (Blaike, 2007). Retroduction, using Bhaskar's (2016) terminology, 'involves imagining a model of a mechanism that, if it were real, would account for a phenomenon in question' (p. 79). Sayer (1992) was quoted in the Introduction of the dissertation emphasising the retroductive goal of moving from actual events to their (possible) causes. Abduction counts as the first step in retroducting generative (or causal) mechanisms. Hence it is an activity that entails 'redescription or recontextualization, most usually (...) in terms of a (...) process that serves to explain the state, condition or happening referred to' (Bhaskar, 2016, p. *Ibíd.*). The

analytical process of abduction means, therefore, trying to understand something in new ways by reading, comparing and making use of alternative conceptual frameworks (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002).

At first sight, and particularly for scholars working with forms of induction and deduction, the logics of retroduction and abduction seem ambiguous and hard to verify. One could ask, for instance, what about the availability of formal language (as in mathematics) or statistical formulas (such as F and t statistics in applied econometrics) to test the consistency (i.e. the internal validity) and the generalisability (i.e. the external validity) of theoretical constructions? However, going back to Loewi's biographical sketch, it is not clear that experiments in the realm of the hard sciences depart from general laws to inform the activities of scientists (deduction). Nor is it the case of jumping directly from data to conclusions (induction), at least not before engaging in retroductive or deductive processes. In this specific case, 'Loewi finally discovered what a pattern of events would look like *if* the mechanism *he was looking for really existed*' (Danermark, et al., 2002, p. 21. *Emphases added*). That is to say, the scientist relied on his previous knowledge in pharmacology and other conversations with his colleagues to imagine how muscles could react in the way they did (abduction) and then applied an experimental procedure to go from observation to disclosing the action of chemical substances in the body (retroduction).

Chapter One already covered the debate on the possibility of naturalism or the extent to which the human world is researchable using the ways of scientists studying physics, chemistry or even biology. Such precision is important to allow Loewi's example to reflect on the social sciences. The point made here is that science (not even in the realm of natural sciences) is not likely to be an (exclusively) inductive or deductive endeavour³⁰. That contention is even stronger in the case of the social sciences, where the incidence of the conditions of relationality (or not atomisms) and system closure generate an impossibility to transit smoothly between generative causes and social events. Any argument containing the superiority of scientific testing through quantification (i.e. statistics, mathematics), vis-à-vis other types of theory testing, is, therefore, a weak (and even an artificial) one.

The questions that (naturally) follow from the above discussion is, hence, how to test theories that emerge through abductive and retroductive processes? The short answer is that there is no single formula to do so (accepting the opposite would imply falling again into assumptions of system closure). A more elaborate response describes the need to resort to the rationale of theoretical forms of validity which depend 'on whether there is a consensus, within the community concerned with the research, about the terms used to characterize the phenomena' (Maxwell, 2012, p. 140). That notion of a valid theoretical construct goes in line with Porter's (2015) reading of Bhaskar social ontology. According to him 'when asking the transcendental question, if [the] premises are correct,

³⁰ In the case of physics, for example, controlled experiments in laboratories are a plausible means to test and verify scientific laws. In those specific cases, both mathematics and statistics serve to support such verifications. However, and for the purpose of the current discussion, it is important to insist that the logic of experimentation in itself is not an inductive or a deductive; these two types of inferential logics apply in the theory testing phase, but not during theory building.

and if the trail of logic (...) [used] is sound, then [one] can be confident of [the] conclusions' (p. 73). Section 2.4.2 emphasises upon these last ideas.

Adenda to the section

Readers will notice how, throughout the research design, the current inquiry makes use of different instruments and methods to explore quantitative and (mainly) qualitative data. For example, the chapters on the experience of educational actors in schools deploys some inductive and deductive guided techniques (such as content and thematic analysis) to explore interview transcripts. These procedures might create a feeling of contradiction between the meta-theoretical debates and the applications of CR to analyse primary sources. But as Porpora (2001) states, '[it] is a mistake (...) to think that critical realism restricts us to humanist methods; realism can also accommodate the methods normally associated with positivism and postmodernism' (p. 261). Crucial to that argument is the stratified ontology discussed in Chapter One, entailing that 'different methods can be seen to be necessary to reveal different aspects of the constituency of phenomena' (Downward & Mearman, 2007, p. 90).

Broadly speaking, it is important to have in mind that CR is a paradigm, a notion that should not be conflated with a methodology or method. As a set of guiding ontological principles, CR embraces different techniques, endorsing their rigour and internal logics. The point is that provided the principles of stratification and open systems, it is not possible to make linear leaps from data to causal mechanisms. In that regard, abduction and retroduction act as methodological umbrellas to make sense of situated analyses (i.e. informing one strata of the analysis) within a more comprehensive research design.

2.3. Morphogenesis/Morphostasis: defining a DSMT for the dissertation

The abstract concepts discussed above - those of abduction and retroduction - do not inform, by themselves, the operationalisation of social research. Such a reflection entails focusing the discussion on researching methodologies and methods in a way that they cohere with the realist principles of the project. Bringing back the elements from Figure 2, the epistemic tenets of CR entail the abandonment of pure forms of induction or deduction, informing the strategy to uncover causal explanations, in this case, for educational failure. As Danemark et al. (2002) contend:

Social reality consists of structures and internally related objects containing causally operating properties. Knowledge of this social reality can only be attained if we go beyond what is empirically observable by asking questions about and developing concepts of the more fundamental, transfactual conditions for the events and phenomena under study. Retroduction is about advancing from one thing (empirical observation of events) and arriving at something different (a conceptualization of transfactual conditions) (p. 96).

Methodologically speaking, the identification of causal drivers, within a realist ontology, entails going beyond empirical facts to identify sets of conditions that account for the emergence of those facts (i.e. school failure and its persistence over time). Archer's (2011) work on social theory explicitly departs from recognising such a methodological challenge, as she comments on the futility in seeking to understand social phenomena by appealing to simplified forms of deductive or inductive research designs. That would be to start, she argues 'from a list of its characteristic parts and an explanation on how these must be related to each other to form a whole (...) [and] how it is sustained and thus proves relatively enduring'. However, she continues, 'Sociology is much messier than that; *it begins from hunches* not from the naming of parts, and probably would not get anywhere if it were to start from there' (p. 61. *Emphasis added*). Departing from *hunches* of the types of underlying dynamics that might account for certain empirical facts happening, represents a middle point between pure and deterministic forms of deduction or induction in social research, as it opens the possibility for researchers to engage in the retroductive exploration outlined in Figure 2. The reference to the notion of a middle-range theory, as mentioned in the Introduction of this document, represents a methodological device to move such abstract reasonings into executable research designs. According to Pawson (2013),

The best known call for abstraction in social science is Merton's attempt to capture an appropriate, middle-range terminology to guide social research. The aim is to find concepts that are: 'sufficiently abstract to deal with different spheres of social behaviour and social structure, so that they transcend sheer description or empirical generalisation' (Merton, 1967: 68). Any event or sequence of events is open to endless descriptions and countless conceptualisations. In explaining them, social scientists have to rely on abstraction. In their heads they try to extract out various significant components or influences and figure out how they combine and interact. With such a theory in place they return to the concrete event and make sense of it. Abstraction is thus the thinking process that allows us to understand an event as an instance of a more general class of happenings. Quite literally, the reasoning goes – 'here is a specific instance, which I can explain as a "case" that falls into a broader explanatory schema'. The prize here is that we have a tool that provides the basis for drawing transferable lessons. Fruitful middle-range concepts will harness together and elucidate many different empirical instances. The same explanation may be located and relocated, used and reused (p. 89)

The methodological aim of this dissertation consists, hence, of generating a middle-range theory for the persistence of poor school performance in Colombia to transcend the flat ontologies compounding alternative theoretical constructs in the field (see Chapter One). Such an exercise, which supposes innovating the ways of doing empirical research in education in the country, aims to *elucidate many different empirical instances* for other researchers 'to pull together explanation in diverse substantive fields' (Pawson, 2000, p. 289). That objective is compatible with the notion of a stratified emergence in the ontology of CR, requiring a need for 'interdisciplinary research [for] analysing a complex phenomenon at its different constitutive levels with different methods' (Danemark, 2000, p. 61). Put differently, the argument in favour of a depth ontology in CR - where phenomena in the

world exist given the operation of multiple mechanisms in multiple layers of social reality - is one that requires comprehensive causal theorisations about, for instance, school performance, and demands interdisciplinary work. Contrary to mainstream SE, where the discussion on causality is reducible to the empirical level – and hence it suffices to have a good statistician to disclose causal explanations - realism invites scholars from substantive fields such as education, pedagogics, governance, etc., to play a role in different levels of social theorising. Then again, and due to the lack of previous critical (and ontologically grounded) work in the field of education policy in Colombia, the generation of a middle-range theory about education failure in the country represents an important contribution to motivate a shift in the policy debate from simplified overgeneralisations to reflections about real causes. Further empirical research will be required ‘to test, refine and adjudicate’ (Pawson & Tilley, 1997, p. 124) theories about those causes in specific settings and circumstances³¹.

The question that follows is, therefore, how to start building a middle-range theory about the persistence of poor school performance in Colombia in a way that it helps to elucidate causal dynamics to foster policy reflections and further research? For Pawson (2000) a realist design must commence with the acknowledgement that ‘[w]hat is 'real' about society is not only its 'events' and 'observables' but also the 'structures' and 'powers' of its objects’ (p. 294). Retrodution, in this case, entails posing initial questions on the types of social relationships and powers (between individuals, between individuals and institutions, etc.) that should be behind certain social facts (i.e. school failure) that causes them to exert such a result in the empirical realm of society. For instance, ‘What does the existence of this object/practice presuppose?; What is it about this object which enables it to do certain things? (Sayer, 2000, p. 16). Here is where Archer’s MGA, understood as a DSMT (see the Introduction to this document), enters the scene, providing the explicit retroductive agenda, and the concrete methodological assertion, backing up the morphogenetic/morphostatic view of social theory. According to this scholar,

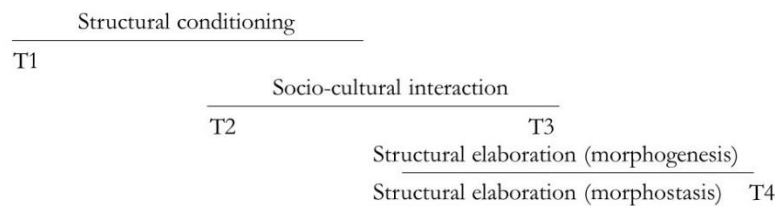
... every theory about the social order necessarily has to incorporate SAC: structure, agency and culture (...) social life comes in a SAC—always and everywhere. (...) If all are indispensable then they have to be recognised as playing some role in every social theory. As has often been noted (under other descriptions), the basic defect of empiricism is its inability to give a causal account of the associations found. In the social sciences, the goal of establishing empirical connections in the social order means that these can be SAC-free. There is no reason why any or all elements of SAC should appear in the putative explanations put forward on the basis of correlations, let alone that their interrelations be examined (Archer, 2013, pp. 4-5)

Archer’s social theory (discussed below) plays its role as a DSMT in this dissertation to assist in ‘marshalling the SAC components to account for the ‘who’, ‘when’, ‘why’ and ‘what’ of change’

³¹ Sayer (2000) endorses the view that all social theories are, in a sense, provisional, but that such a situation of fallibility is vital for advancing in knowledge about social phenomena. In his account, ‘Critical realists accept (...) that notwithstanding the daunting complexity of the world and the fallible and situated character of knowledge, it is possible to develop reliable knowledge and for there to be progress in understanding’ (p. 30).

(Archer, 2013, p. 10). This framework provides a conceptual guideline that links, in Archer's definition, 'structure and agency [and culture to] engage in empirical research without erroneously assuming that one has direct access to reality in the form of causal relations or raw data about individuals' (Cruickshank, 2003a, p. 2)³². Considering all SAC elements within the meta-theoretical boundaries (or requirements) of CR becomes, hence, a methodological device with which to ground its abstract ontological and epistemological tenets in a retroductive research framework. This is the case because, as illustrated in the sketch in Figure 2, the MGA framework allows decoupling the study of *necessarily related conditions* accounting for the emergence of empirical events, such as the persistence of poor school performance in Northern Colombia.

Figure 3. The morphogenetic/static cycle



Source: Archer (1995)

Figure 3 introduces Archer's MGA as a morphogenetic/static cycle linking Structure, Culture and Agency in time. The sketch does not reflect an attempt to generate an ordering type of scheme to analyse society (see the Introduction), but rather, and in the spirit of a DSMT, it 'provides a framework for scholars to employ in their empirical work' (Maccarini, 2013, p. 43). As for the notion of retroductive research, which entails departing from observations to then delve into generative mechanisms, Archer (2011) clarifies that while causal narratives come written from T1 to T4, doing empirical research entails departing from T4 to abduct and, eventually, retroduct (see Figure 2) explanations. In other words

.. we note [in T4] some relational property in the social order (or a sector of it) that seems to exert irreducible causal powers of its own kind -as detected through their tendential effect -even though its components can be fully described. The implication is that generative mechanisms, which exist largely unexercised will not usually attract the attention of social scientists. Although emergent causal powers are *judged* to be such according to the causal criterion, social science does rely upon (something of)

³² This way Archer engages '[t]he debate on structure–agency and the tools of analysis that it generates [that is] (...) one of those omnipresent and everlasting discussions in philosophy, political theory and social sciences' (Knio, 2013, p. 257). In Archer's (1995) account, '[the] 'problem of structure and agency' is now a familiar phrase used to denote central dilemmas in social theory - especially the rival claims of voluntarism versus determinism, subjectivism versus objectivism, and the micro- versus macro-scopic in sociology' (p. 65).

empiricism's perceptual criterion to their *detection*. Although the social scientist is not reliant upon (or expectant of finding) Humean “constant conjunctions”, nevertheless, an established correlation coefficient is not a gift horse to reject but rather an impetus to causal investigation. After all, our hunches usually derive from our observation (Archer, 2011, p. 63).

While the Chapter looks more deeply, across its sections and subsections, into these methodological features, the reader can start making sense of their practical implications by considering the empirical driver of the dissertation. In Archerian terms, the theorisation about certain educational dynamics in some regions of the country takes as one initial step some observations made by the researcher at schools. At this level, the description of some possible patterns (i.e. the attitudes of teachers and students) occurring at T4, will help to elucidate some initial hunches (or provisional hypotheses) about the drivers of those dynamics, and about how they are (potentially) linked together through time. The discussion now focuses on opening the morphogenetic/static cycle to study its different elements (and its specific role in this dissertation). But before delving into the various stages, it is worth devoting some space to introducing two concepts that will help the readers to navigate throughout morphogenesis/morphostasis more easily. These are the concepts of causal mechanisms and (subsidiary to this) emergent properties. The preface to the presentation of the MGA also includes some extensions of the discussion of the rationale behind using Archer's framework as a DTMS to morphogenesise, via *analytical dualism*, the study of SE in Colombia.

Before engaging in that discussion, it is worth, however, clarifying further the intention of using the MGA as a DTMS - an idea inspired by Porpora's (2013) work - and not as an Explanatory Programme (EP), as Archer presented it for the first time in her 1995 book³³. She refers to it further, and provide additional methodological reflections, in her recent work on the morphogenetic view of society:

All theories have a social ontology [SO], whether implicit or explicit, which effectively defines the constituents of the social world. Therefore, the SO performs a role of conceptual regulation because it governs those concepts that are deemed admissible in description as in explanation (...). In itself, a SO tells no one how to go about explaining anything. For this an explanatory programme [EP] is needed. That is what the Morphogenetic Approach is; the methodological complement of Critical Realism, which is its meta-theoretical social ontology. [However, it] is the investigator who contributes the material and problem to be explained and, if successful, produces what I have called a Practical Social Theory [PST] (Archer, 2013, p. 9).

³³ With the notion of an explanatory framework, Archer (1995) refers to the commitment of realism itself to acknowledge and incorporate '(a) pre-existent structures as generative mechanisms, (b) their interplay with other objects possessing causal powers and liabilities proper to them in what is a stratified social world, and (c) non-predictable but none the less explicable outcomes arising from interactions between the above, which take place in the open system that is society' (p. 159).

One way of reading that last excerpt is by considering two possible implications that emerge from it. On the one hand, seeing the MGA as an Explanatory Programme (EP) itself, Archer argues in favour of the ontological superiority of the morphogenetic/morphostatic framework, vis-à-vis alternative views to social theorising within a realist way of thinking. Ideally, as one could deduce from her message, all social theories should follow a morphogenetic view of society. On the other hand, however, her call for PTSs entails also that *it is the investigator who contributes the material and problem to be explained*, meaning that, in the end, what should have a higher weight in the definition of a research design is the nature of the empirical problem at stake. In the specific case of this thesis, the overriding dominance of positivism in educational research (see Chapter One) signified that before this work CR was not even among the possibilities to engage in answering scientific queries about education politics in Colombia. Such a panorama indicates multiple challenges for the current project. The first one (i) is the need to justify the use of CR ontologically and methodologically. Conversely, it is also necessary (ii) to justify CR empirically, by exploring its usefulness in field research. Finally, (iii) there is an effort implied in the analytical operationalisation of CR in the theorising about education in society. Operationally speaking, to unleash a whole MGA seemed implausible as it carried an important opportunity cost regarding the focus of the investigation. For instance, the deep exploration of one case, as the researcher finally did, had the advantage of helping inform (ii) with data from the day-to-day practices at schools in Northern Colombia. The non-existence of CR studies in education in Colombia (and, with some exceptions, in the whole Latin American region) needs further empirical support (also as a political argument) before engaging in more profound theorisations.

The argument here is not to rule out the use of the MGA as an EP simply because it is easier to do so. The feasibility criterion entails balancing between the explanatory power of the theoretical exercise and pursuing the acceptance of this approach by scholars with influence over policy-making circles in the country. If the approach is not accepted, its explanatory power, despite its ontological consistency, loses grip, and hence its potential to inform, educational debates. Transparency also demands saying that this way of conceiving the research project (assuming (i), (ii) and (iii) from the last paragraph) reflects the process itself undertaken by the main researcher of the thesis. With former training in public management and theoretical economics (at the MA level), the researcher also had to follow a personal process of learning and unlearning fostered by his interest in answering a real-world problem, instead of simply following a research template imposed by disciplinary boundaries. As discussed in Chapter One, the lack of satisfactory answers to contemporary educational challenges in the country, despite the existence of cumulative research on the topic (and within the boundaries of the economics of education), demanded deeper explorations into ontological, epistemological and methodological elements of the inquiry. From that point of view, endorsing the MGA as a DSMT, and not as an EP, represents the effort to *morphogenise* a critical realist (and exploratory) study of a widely-researched problem, rather than engaging in a whole morphogenetic study of education in the country. That second (and broader) task signifies a new research agenda emerging from the current one.

2.3.1. *On causal mechanism and emergent properties: the realist notion of causality*

So far, the use of the concept *mechanism* (to refer to causal drivers) in the text coheres with a general notion of a generative causal force. In the case of physics and its applied fields (such as engineering), the term mechanism commonly describes systematic and standardised processes through which different kinds of inputs become usable outputs. The mechanistic view of society would hence imply a systematic and standardised notion of human behaviour. Education production functions, in the economics of education, fit into such an understanding, where '[i]nputs, in the form of financial and material resources, teachers and pupil characteristics are acted on by educational processes producing outcomes' (Tikly, 2011, p. 6). However, problems emanate from these forms of conceptualisation, vis-à-vis the ontology of open systems in CR. The consequence of the language of mechanisms, when endorsing flat social ontologies, falls not only in its backing up of spurious methodologies, but also carries the moral cost of removing agency from human beings³⁴.

The last paragraph offers insights into what a causal mechanism in this thesis is not about. For example, a mechanism is not a chain of events, nor a set of correlations between empirical variables. That would entail working, once again, under assumptions of system closure (i.e. every time A occurs, then B is expected) and non-stratification (i.e. causes and consequences operating solely in the realm of empirical events). No realist methodological framework is keen to such conceptualisations. Realists, 'by contrast, think of mechanisms in ontological terms, as relations between entities' (Gorski, 2009, p. 160), or as systems of related elements from which the causal powers of social objects (i.e. a failing school) *emerge* (Porpora, 2015). That is to say, rather than talking of hierarchies between variables, the notion of mechanism involves particular configurations of entities that provide social objects with their power to make something happen. For instance, the particular configurations that give birth to contemporary educational systems (i.e. a cultural belief in the transformative power of education alongside the percentage of the Gross National Product invested in the educational system) act as a set of relations without which the teacher-student interaction would appear inexistent. The social mechanism, in this case, stands for the process of emergence (see Chapter One) of educational systems where teachers get their power, for example, to sanction undisciplined students.

In line with the realist notion of social emergence, the study of causal mechanism finds its focus in the identification of emergent properties. This 'concept expresses the idea that a thing – sometimes (...) *an entity* or *a whole* – can have properties or capabilities that are not possessed by its parts' (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 4. *Original emphasis*). The example of H2O discussed in Chapter One illustrates such a rationale, by emphasising the idea that the power of water to cease fire is an emergent property from the conjunction of hydrogen and oxygen, neither of which serve, on their own, to contain burning flames. Gorski (2009) uses the case of a clock to discuss similar implications. As he writes, 'the power of a clock to move its hands is due to the causal power of

³⁴ That is a common practice in much of the literature on SE research. Many authors, according to Willmott (2002), endorse, for instance, 'the *empty vessel* view of children's learning, seeing pupils as passive receivers of knowledge, poured into them by the teacher' (p. 166. *Original emphasis*). Likewise, as Coffield (2012) discusses, one critical weakness of the international literature on the determinant role of teachers in education, 'is that teachers at the receiving end are passive in relation to the content and process of the 'best practice'; but they tend to exert their professional independence by appearing to comply, while adapting, ignoring or rejecting top down reforms' (p. 138).

the clock's *mechanism* (...). We know this, because if we remove or disable the mechanism, the hands will not move' (p. 158. *Original emphasis*). The possibility of naturalism (Chapter One) allows extrapolating these ideas to the social world. In the specific case of education, for example, mechanisms such as emergent properties, set an agenda to study the way in which 'histories, structures, and social interaction combine in and affect processes of global education governance' (Edwards Jr & Brehm, 2015, p. 276).

In Archer's MGA, the entities that comprise the parts of a system (i.e. a school, the education policy of a country and its institutions) take the form of Structural (SEPs), Cultural (CEPs) and Personal Emergent Properties (PEPs). That is to say, one social object (for example, SE) emerges from the conjugation of material (i.e. resources), cultural (i.e. ideas or beliefs)³⁵ and agential (i.e. reflexivity) powers, each of which is not reducible to its constitutive elements. These are all emergent properties, and not atomistic variables, in the sense that, given the ontology of stratification, each of them emerges due to the relational dynamics of entities or parts operating in different strata of reality. Such interactions are better explained below, in the presentation of the cycles of Archer's approach. Her framework takes the non-conflation of structure and agency seriously (see Chapter One), by providing people with *different degrees of freedom* to act in autonomy from SEPs and CEPs, and without which it is difficult to explain the possibility of structural morphogenesis (or transformation).

However, these last concepts do not account for the whole *causal* picture. Ontological discussions in Chapter One and in this section, require the need to differentiate between a causal force (a mechanism) and its causal efficacy. According to Scott (2005), there is a distinction 'between the object with its set of powers to act causally in the world and a set of conditions or other objects in the world in a particular relation to them' (p. 641). Back to the example of a clock, working now as an alarm: its malfunctioning can result in a 'person to be late at work [and possibly] lose [her] job' (Gorski, 2009, p. 159). However, this whole causal linkage does not solely depend on the (*internal*) emergent properties of the alarm clock to emit a buzzing sound, but also on the action of *external forces* (i.e. a very strict boss), leading to '*contingent and conjunctural* outcomes' (Gorski, 2009, p. 159. *Original emphases*). Hence, the notion of open systems - in contrast to the deterministic idea of conjoined forces or regularities (Collier, 1994) - in which 'causal relationships are contingent (they *may* pertain) whereas logical relationships [or mechanism] do obtain' (Archer, 1995, p. 169. *Original emphasis*). Causality, in that regard, involves a narrative linking SEPs, CEPs and PEPs. In Archer's (1995) language, explanatory endeavours consist in providing *analytical histories of emergence*, where '[a]t every level the tendential powers of generative mechanisms are complemented and supplemented by a historical analysis of the concrete contingencies which intervened to produce particular outcomes' (p. 327).

³⁵ In Archer's (1995) usage of the terminology, what differentiates a SEP is 'its primary dependence upon material resources' (p. 175), while, in the case of CEPs, these entail 'components of culture' (p. 180), such as ideas or beliefs. As discussed later in this document, the issue of the emergence of *specific configurations* of those constitutive elements of SEPs and CEPs is what makes realist ontology take distance from views of society that reduce structures to observable patterns to describe the incentives that people have to act in society.

2.3.2. *Analytical dualism and morphogenising the study of society*

The distinction between causal forces - those with the potential to do or create something - and causal efficacy is at the heart of the MGA. In that way, Archer's social theory fits into the ontology of CR, as it endorses the notion of stratification and relational emergence. The notion of *analytical dualism*, which in Archerian terms 'provides the most powerful tool in practical social analysis' (Archer, 1995, p. 66), exalts such a distinction between necessity and contingency, by placing people's action as the efficacious element in social theory. Such an endorsement:

...implies a methodology (...) where explanation of why things social are so and not otherwise depends upon an account of how the properties and powers of the *people* causally intertwine with those of the *parts*. Analytical dualism means emphasizing linkages by unpacking what was referred to earlier as the 'impact' and 'import' of and between different strata (p. 15. *Original emphasis*).

The intention to use the MGA as a DSMT, or, as suggested earlier in this text, to *morphogenise* the study of the persistence of poor school in Northern Colombia, departs from the acknowledgement of the methodological principles of analytical dualism. Willmott's (1999a) aphorism that 'emergent structural properties only work through people, not in spite of people' (p. 9) summarises quite succinctly its practical implication by asserting the way in which the final results (T4) in Figure 3 depend on the actions of people. However, back to Gorski's (2009, p. 159) debate on social mechanisms, as one should not conflate necessary conditions with efficient causes, social theories have to avoid reducing structural properties (SEPs and CEPs) to those of people (PEPs). As the more detailed presentation of Archer's approach in the next section shows, taking that distinction seriously (between the necessary and the contingent) entails undertaking the study of social phenomena in the present tense (i.e. education policy) as an emergent result of a stratified and not pre-determined relationship between social structures and agency. These entities have autonomous powers or properties, which operate in different realms of social reality (see Chapter One), but it is in their interaction that social change (morphogenesis) or reproduction (morphostasis) emerges. In Archer's (1995) account, therefore,

'[the] conception [of] *analytical dualism* (...) is based on two premises. Firstly, it depends upon an ontological view of the social world as stratified, such that the emergent properties of structures and agents are irreducible to one another, meaning that in principle they are analytically separable. Secondly, it asserts that given structures and agents are also temporally distinguishable (in other words, it is justifiable and feasible to talk of preexistence and posteriority when dealing with specific instances of the two), and this can be used methodologically in order to examine the interplay between them and thus explain changes in both - over time. In a nutshell, *analytical dualism* is a methodology based upon the historicity of emergence (p. 66. *Original emphases*).

The human's mediation of SEPs and CEPs, hence, does not equate to reducing the past to some uncontextualised agential activity. The incidence of the material and the cultural elements of social

reality are still on the table in the form of potential enablers or constraints to human action (this idea is clarified with the introduction of the MGA in the next section). However, it is the intentional action of people (PEPs) that brings in SEPs and CEPs together (as it did in the past) to configure new ontological totalities. One example of this is the existence of a certain education policy today, with its material (i.e. a budget, a written law) and cultural (i.e. its motivation to focus on children's productivity in the classroom) features. On the one hand, one can note that any causal power of this social object - for instance to provide incentives to teachers -, will causally materialise when people decide when and how they will use these sanctioning or prizing mechanisms. It is the Secretary of Education who decides to enforce the law, or it is school director who decides whether or not to report underperforming teachers to the educational authorities. On the other hand, however, one could also analyse the emergence of this specific policy as the product of the past action of social agents. For instance, decades ago, some people created a Ministry of Education and back in the 1970s economists from the World Bank imported the human capital approach to international educational policy debates (Mundy & Verger, 2015), both of which served as pre-existent conditions favouring the introduction of new managerial reforms in education.

It is worth mentioning that in this debate the notion of *dualism*, as opposed to one of *duality*, distances the MGA from other conceptions of social theorising. Giddens' (1984) sociology, towards which Archer (2010) sets an explicit oppositional stand, is a good example of a conceptualisation of duality between structure and agency. In Giddens' view, 'the structural properties of social systems *do not exist outside* of action but are chronically implicated in its production and reproduction' (Giddens, 1984, p. 374. *Emphasis added*). In Giddensean sociology structure and agency are, therefore, conceptualised as opposite faces of the same coin (McAnulla, 2002; Hay, 2002), making it impossible to visualise them as entities operating in different strata of reality (social structures pre-exist human action)³⁶. Likewise, Porpora (2013) pinpoints in the tradition of anthropology to 'encompass everything human under the category of culture' (p. 27) another type of duality in social theory that reduces, for instance, cultural systems (or CEPs) to the cultural beliefs of people. Similar to the Giddensian world, structure and agency live in conflation to one another because cultural structures lack autonomous properties beyond the imagination of human beings. Drawing on a realist spirit, the author resorts in the example of language (as a

³⁶ Along the same lines, it is relevant to highlight that the notion social structure endorsed by a morphogenetic view of social research differs from the notions informing both positivist and (thick) constructivist views of society. According to Porpora (2015), within a realist ontology, a 'structure consists of human relations in the midst of actors that connects them to each other and to social things' (Porpora, 2015, p. 104). Those relations, he contends, involve issues such as, for instance, power, competition, exploitation and dependency (Porpora, 2013, p. 27). Alternative approaches to social theory place their emphasis on structures such as rules or resources (*a la* Giddens), as extra-human systems (*a la* Durkheim), as behavioural patterns (like in rational choice), all of which represent forms of conflating (or reducing one another) the emergent properties of structure and agency. Back to the ontological principles discussed in Chapter One, these different conceptions of social structures undermine the principles of stratification and the non-relational emergence of social phenomena. That is not the case under a morphogenetic lense, as this 'would define these *component elements* [*or these human relations*] as *emergent properties*, arising from relations between the structures which constitute a particular system: social systems being seen as specific configurations of their constitutive structures where the emergent features of the former derive from the relations between the latter. Thus, unlike the *institutional pattern*, rightly dismissed, which confines components to observable entities, structures themselves contain non-observable emergent powers whose combination (relations between relations) generate the further emergent properties' (Archer, 1995, pp. 68-69. *Original emphases*).

cultural form or expression) to defy such reasoning, by arguing that ‘none of us individually produces language, which is a collective, emergent phenomenon’ (p. 27). Hence language, as a social structure, exists in spite of people but is mediated (used, distorted, transformed) by people³⁷.

That last example introduces one last element to the discussion on *morphogenising* this study (by using, once again, the MGA as a DSMT). It consists in asserting that, back to the SAC acronym, social theories also need to transcend types of conflation between the material and the cultural structures of society. Such a reflection emerges from considering the material-ideational debate in the literature, concerning ‘the way in which institutions and ideas and the material and the ideational interact, in an iterative way, when explaining [social phenomena]’ (Marsh & Hall, 2015, p. 3). For example, as Porpora (2013) contends, ‘with the so-called cultural turn in sociology (...) the concept of culture has now more or less swallowed up the concept of structure’ (p. 27), entailing, hence, a type of duality that obfuscates analytical possibilities in social research³⁸. To clarify that last assertion, one should think of the realist understanding of human agency (see next section) as one that, in the realm of the MGA, experiences ‘structural and cultural struggles’ (Archer, 1995, p. 191) when making its way through the world. Said differently, human beings, as social objects, portray reflexive properties that emerge, in part, in the way they subjectively endorse, and combine, material resources and ideas to guide their decisions. If material instrumentalism was the sole driver of human behaviour (as in orthodox economic theory), how could one explain the existence of underpaid, yet enthusiastic teachers in schools? The counterexample is the physician who, in spite of his commitment to the Hippocratic oath, cares only about working with patients that can afford costly clinical procedures. The point is that one should consider both types of drivers in social theory, without discarding any of them a priori.

Summing up, the use of Archer’s MGA as a DSMT to morphogenise the study of education policy in Colombia requires the importance of differentiating between the potentiality of social structures (SEPs and CEPs) to exert their casual powers in society, and causality itself, which accounts for the situation in which those causal forces shape and unleash causal processes. Social causality is an issue addressed by Bhaskar (1998) in his analysis of the possibility of naturalism (see Chapter One), as he recognises that ‘[s]ocial structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of the activities they govern’ (p. 42). That is not to pledge a type of conflation between human structures and agency (in the sense that one mirrors the other), but rather to acknowledge that ‘agents are the only efficient causes in social life’ (Archer, 1995, p. 195)³⁹. A major

³⁷ Similarly, Cruickshank (2003b) makes use of Popper’s idea of the objective (or external to individuals) existence of knowledge, in the form of books and manuscripts, or Archer’s view that religious doctrines ‘can exist as objective factors in their own right’ (p. 112).

³⁸ Porpora (2013) refers to debate about poverty to exemplify it: ‘The one-time debate over whether chronic poverty is the result of social structure as opposed to a so-called culture of poverty is now much harder even to conceptualize. Yet the issue has not gone away. In fact, with the worldwide crisis of capitalism and the attendant increases in unemployment and poverty, the issue has again become prominent’ (p. 27).

³⁹ This idea (or argument) is one that natural scientists are willing to endorse. According to Elis (2005) ‘physics per se cannot causally determine the outcome of human creativity; rather it creates the *possibility space* to allow human intelligence to function autonomously (...) Physics by itself cannot explain any behaviour that is adaptive and depends on context, for example, beaver dam-building and the dances of bees. It is plausible that these also emerged at late

contribution of the MGA resides precisely in the way it fleshes out this understanding of social structures as social constructs, without falling into forms of thick constructivism that end up depriving the former of their autonomous powers to condition forms of social interaction. The introduction of the time element is key to advancing in such a conceptualisation, by arguing that the conditioning of SEPs and CEPs over PEPs occurs in the past tense. That is to say, even if these are all products of human action, that action occurred in the past, from the perspective of human beings living in the present. Hence,

... what is involved is breaking up the sequence [between SEPs, CEPs and PEPs] analytically into three stages, which for both realism and morphogenesis could be termed Emergence-Interplay-Outcome. Thus, although structure and agency are at work continuously in society, the analytical element consists in breaking up these flows into intervals determined by the problem in hand: given any problem and accompanying periodization, projection of the three phases forwards and backwards would connect up with anterior and posterior analytical cycles. This represents the bed-rock of understanding structuring over time, which then enables specific forms of structure elaboration to be explained (Archer, 1995, p. 168).

2.3.3. From actual events to the building of causal theories: introducing the MGA

Social life, it is relevant to insist, comes in a SAC *always and everywhere*. To *morphogenise* the current study, following the discussion above, means taking that assertion seriously. The discussion turns now to the decoupling of Figure 3 to elucidate the way it makes sense of the structure and agency debate (according to the ontological terms discussed so far). Given the consideration of the current study of the MGA as a DSMT, its presentation emphasises making sense of its potential to explain actual events (i.e. what the researchers observed at schools), more than in describing it from the view of its logical diachronic order (i.e. from T1 to T4). In other words, the discussion of Archer's (1995) *model* responds to epistemic arguments introduced in the previous sections on the need to depart from observations to abduct and then retroduce (possible) causal explanations. The logical conclusion is to invert the order of the analysis from T4 to T1.

Practically speaking, it also makes sense to depart from T4 as this is the time span in which researchers make observations about specific social phenomena. For instance, it is in T4 - what Archer coins as the end of the process of elaboration - that SE scholars (see Chapter One) have identified some correlations between test scores and school variables (i.e. the skills of teachers, the conditions of schools' learning infrastructure). It is also in T4 that fieldwork takes place, hence when the conversations with school actors occur and when the investigator registers certain dynamics/practices (i.e. the lack of discipline in a classroom) that introduce him to the first stages

times in the expanding Universe as higher-level autonomous behaviours, made possible but not causally determined by the underlying physics and chemistry of matter.' (p. 743. *Original emphasis*).

of a process of abduction⁴⁰. All these observations provide an explanation that needs to transcend, following the language of CR, their factual (or actual) state. Ontologically speaking, T4 is the result of a process of emergence that gave birth to actual events, and the challenge is to explain those dynamics, which are non-linear and non-actualist (they live in past events).

While the analysis in the MGA is not one that follows one single direction (researchers will eventually need to revisit stages of the model to refine their theoretical attempts), the first leap in Figure 3 is from T4 to T3. From the researcher's point of view, that first move, just like the subsequent ones (to T2 and then to T1) is an interpretative one (Patomäki H. , 2009)⁴¹, and encompasses the description and theorisation of the agential drivers of particular forms of social interactions. Here one can talk about drivers, in the sense that the power to act emerges from agency itself - Archer's (2003; 2003a; 2003b) later works introduce the concept of an internal conversation - in conjunction with, but not determined by, SEPs and CEPs. The relationship between humans' motivations to act with the directional guidance of pre-existing social structures towards certain action paths is self-evident in the fact that '[a]gents, from the morphogenetic perspective, are agents of something' (Archer, 1995, p. 257. Original emphasis). People do not live in a contextual vacuum, meaning that their life experiences are shaped by what pre-exists for them, such as their family values or the economic and political dynamics (both historical and contextual) of their neighbourhood, city, region or country. Hence, agents are agents of something they represent (i.e. a cultural identity) or, equally possible in an open system, of something towards which they are in opposition (i.e. they might feel threatened by those cultural aspects they are supposed to impersonate). Likewise, however, people interact with other people (within the pre-structured settings mentioned above), from which they learn things (or not), borrow ideas to strengthen their political positions (or not), and against whose influence they decide to resist (or not). People's agency is therefore not determined, but only influenced, by the pre-existing, given that the existent (in the present tense) unleashes in them forms of self-reflexivity (or their autonomous PEPs). Such a distinction (between yesterday and today) emanates from the principle of analytical dualism - *always through people and in relation to people*.

However, the challenge in most social theories to conceptualise people's motivations within a non-conflationary view of structure and agency persists. The proposals from rational choice

⁴⁰ Researchers can also use T4 (in their own cronogram) to retrieve historical data that will eventually aid them in making sense of what they observe in the present tense. However, and for this specific research setting, all these tasks seek to explain current events.

⁴¹ According to the tenets of CR (i.e. open systems, stratification), '[t]he scientific study of causes is (...) interpretative', from the perspective of the researcher, and hence, every '[c]ausal explanation is a mode of interpretation, and also aims at (better) understanding' (Patomäki H. , 2009, p. 313). Hence, all the movements from T4 to T3, T2 and T1, are, epistemologically speaking, interpretative ones. As should be clear by now, this interpretative move is an epistemic one, as it indicates an intransitive process in which researchers use fallible theories to make sense of an ontological truth (that there are real causes for social phenomena). It should also be clear that the latter does not entail endorsing a constructivist ontology (i.e. there are multiple realities, there are infinite answers to explain one social event. Realist scholars are insistent in pointing out that, while CR endorses epistemic relativism (i.e. different researchers might arrive at different solutions), it rejects judgmental relativism (or the fact that different answers are equally valid). Precisely because they study the real objective properties of social objects, some theories about how these properties operate are simply better than others.

scholars, for instance, do not fit into such a requirement, given their reduction of humans' *freedom* to structural conditions (to provide good incentives) of society (Archer, 1995; Hay, 2002). Academics informed by relativist positions in social theory also fail to offer good tentative solutions to this matter because they see individual experiences in the world always as a matter of contingency - it is hence senseless, they would argue, to talk about the real causes of behaviour (Cruickshank, 2003a). The MGA's proposal departs from a much simpler assumption (vis-à-vis rationalistic behaviour), but one which brings into the discussion different elements (both structure-led and agency-led) from which the complexity of human motivations for action emerges. That is that, in the end, (most) people seek to make their way through life⁴². Consequently, *the stratified model of people*, as Archer (2003b) elegantly puts it, sets a meta-theoretical argument on how to focus the exploration of people's identity and their possible motivations, by anchoring individual reflections (internal conversations) to the situations that people face in their day-to-day life. In her words,

Fundamentally, personal identity is a matter of what we care about in the world. Constituted as we are, and the world being the way it is, humans ineluctably interact with three different orders of reality: the natural, the practical and the social. Humans necessarily have to sustain organic relationships, work relationships and social relationships—if they are to survive and thrive. Therefore, we cannot afford to be indifferent about the concerns that are embedded in each of these three orders (p. 20).

Two elements with methodological implications stem from that last excerpt. First, people's actions in the world often depend on internally related relationships between their roles (or places in which the stand) and their self-identities. That sense of relationality is crucial for realist theorising and coheres with the basic logic of the stratified social emergence of social phenomena (see Chapter One). Relevant for the current study is Sayer's (2000) example of the social identity of teachers, as 'what it is to be a tutor cannot be explained at the level of individuals but only in terms of their relation to students, and vice versa' (p. 13)⁴³. Secondly, Archer (2003b) conceives of a notion of a *stratified social subject*, meaning that any decisions people may take will depend on the way they balance the influence of different strata of reality (the natural, the practical and the social). From that point of view, the path towards unveiling the complexities of the human agency calls for deep explorations of the formation of human reflexivity - that is the topic of Archer's (2003c) exploration on *the Internal Conversation*. However, given that the object of study of this dissertation is more closely

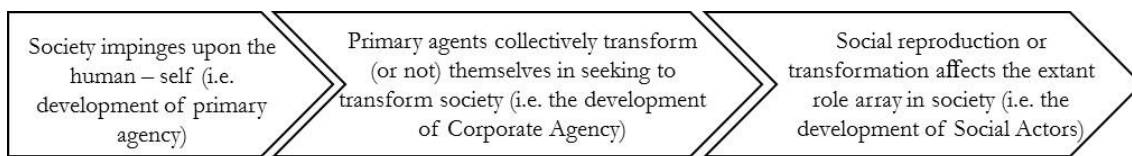
⁴² According to Archer (1995), '[t]he idea that a person is something which is aware of its persistence and progress through time is thus to advance the continuity of consciousness as part of what we mean by personal identity. This continuous 'sense of self' is what will be defended here as the indispensable contribution which our humanity makes to our social life. For unless there are persons who know themselves to be continuous over time, who work as persisting self-recorders, then nothing would prompt the attempt to survive in society and likewise nothing would secure the survival of society. Survival itself would not be on the agenda. Though it is otiose, perhaps it makes matters more graphic to stress that social activities which take place over time, like acting or reflecting themselves, as well as prudence, deferred gratification, strategic intervention, planning or hoping all depend upon a continuous sense of self' (p. 282).

⁴³ One critique contended in Chapter One is precisely the way in which SE scholars in the education strand of the theory conceive the notion of a 'good teacher' in isolation from the conceptualization of students.

related to the dynamics of the Colombian educational system at meso/macro levels, the exposition here focuses on the behaviours and the reflexivity of groups of people (see below)⁴⁴.

To theorise the second morphogenetic/static cycle in Figure 3, Archer (2003a) therefore opens the concept of agency into agents and actors. The former she defines as ‘collectivities sharing the same life-chances’ (p. 261). Actors, on the other hand, are ‘role incumbents and roles themselves have emergent properties which cannot be reduced to the characteristics of their occupants’ (Archer, 2003a, p. 283). The distinctiveness between these two entities resides precisely in the types of orders they both represent (remembering that, once again, that are agents *of* something). Agents, in this case, refer to the social order of social life. In Archer’s (2003a) account these can be either *corporate* (representing organised groups in pursuit of common interests) or *primary* (unorganised people, yet with common interests). Actors are role incumbents (i.e. as teachers, managers, workers) in different institutions of society (i.e. schools, factories, government offices, etc.), hence reflecting the practical order of life. The configurations of different PEPs, at this stage of the cycle, depends on the way people interpret their position in the world. That occurs as they are ‘weighing (...) interests against one another and weighing them against their [personal] values [and positions as agents and actors]’ (Archer, 1995, p. 282). Here it is important to emphasise this time specificity (regarding what is happening between T2 and T3 in Figure 3), rejecting any charge of the MGA reducing people’s action to their self-reflexivity (an upward conflation⁴⁵). As it will become clearer in the next paragraphs, these agential moves are anchored to organic (objective) human features taking place between T1 and T2.

Figure 4. Morphogenesis of Agency



Adapted from Archer (2003a)

⁴⁴ From the definitions above, it becomes clear that studies of this style would benefit enormously from insights from disciplines that make further explorations into the variety of elements accounting for emergent properties in different layers (or strata) of the human psychology. However, citing Sayer (2000), ‘while we don’t have to go back to the level of biology or chemistry to explain social phenomena, this does not mean the former have no effect on society. Nor does it mean we can ignore the way in which we react back on other strata, for example through contraception, medicine, agriculture and pollution. As we are increasingly reminded these days, but as Marx made clear in the Theses on Feuerbach in referring to ‘sensuous human activity’, we are embodied beings, and the interaction of the social with the physical needs to be acknowledge’ (p. 13).

⁴⁵ Archer coins the term conflation to refer to different ways in which social theorists fail in acknowledging the autonomous properties of structures and human agents. An upward conflation occurs when SEPs and CEPs are reduced to PEPs, hence structures are deemed passive (or inexistent in the realm of people’s mind). A downward conflation happens in the opposite situation, when individuals are treated as passive reproducers of structural powers. Finally, a central conflation describes the Giddensian world, where theorists conceive structure and agency as an inseparable amalgam of things.

Figure 4 represents the *morphogenesis of agency* to assist the theorisation of social interactions occurring between T2 and T3, and overlapping with the T3 and T4 time span. Again, such overlaps reflect continuity in people's activities which, none the less, can be disentangled analytically. According to the sketch in Figure 4, human agents might experience changes in the process of interaction as, due to the exchange with other agents (and in specific settings), individuals and groups might reassess the strategies orienting their political moves. Before the actual interaction occurs, a certain distribution of power (material, cultural) exists in society, which means that individuals in T2, both in their roles as actors, as agents, portray a certain self-identity which gives them motives and potential means to act. The time lapse between the building of motivations to act (by T2) and action itself (towards T3) entails, however, that before the development (or action) of social actors the identity (hence, personal values attached to motives) of people might change. This happens as a result of their interaction with other people, both with their same group of agents (i.e. members of a same federation of teachers) and with other groups (i.e. members of the federation with public servants from the Ministry of Education). Chronologically speaking, Archer (2003a) argues that, while positions in society pre-exist their role as incumbents, all people first belong to a primary or corporate agency, 'depending upon the [under]privileged (...) positions into which [people] are involuntarily born' (p. 144). Hence, taking her argument further,

[a]gency is a springboard to positions in the total role array and the interests which we possess qua Agents serve to make the choice of role positions reasonable. (...) Through interaction with other collectivities [individuals and groups] expands the array of available positions, as part of the primary morphogenesis of society which its organised interaction brings about. These initial interests with which Agents are endowed [in T2] (...) provide the leverage upon which reasons (otherwise known as constraints and enablements) for different courses of action operate. They do not determine the particular Social Actor an individual chooses to become, but they strongly condition what type of Social Actor the vast majority can and do become (Archer, 2003a, pp. 284, 285).

To be more specific, at the beginning of T2 some people might find themselves better organised than others - hence the distinction between primary and corporate agency - to pursue specific political agendas. At that moment of time, as actors, individuals are starting to decide upon possible action paths, and those motivations might lead them (intentionally or not⁴⁶) to start interacting with other people. Their status as role incumbents, and as members of groups, means that, for instance, all teachers, parents, students, carry the responsibilities and expectations placed on them by society (i.e. to be good teachers, to be supportive of childrens' learning processes). Here it is important to bring back the idea of the non-reducibility of the emergent properties of social structures to reaffirm that role incumbents subjectively interpret objective powers of pre-existent institutions, and that social relations importantly shape such subjectivities. The way people make interpretations of social

⁴⁶ One implication of living in an open system is that there is always space for contingency. Here that means that individuals might not plan to interact with certain individuals, yet, life might bring them together.

structures, and how they assume certain behavioural traits (i.e. a teacher can choose different pedagogical paths) depends, therefore, on how they balance the objective opportunity costs of alternative courses of action. These costs are both related to their membership of a collective (i.e. a disloyal teaching union member can lose political support from their peers) and to the role they personalise (i.e. a *bad* teacher can get fired) and can mutate in time (between T2 and T3). That is the whole point. Within such a process, individuals can decide to join or abandon certain groups of agents. The new incentives that emerge from those possible new memberships can modify (or not) both the intentions and the means (the belonging to a new agency can affect the individual's access to new resources) to exercise their role. The conclusion, in this phase, is that '[s]ocial change is the resultant of aggregate effects produced by Primary Agents in conjunction with emergent properties generated by Corporate Agents and thus does not approximate to what anyone wants' (Archer, 1995, p. 265). Truong & Knio (2016) wrap up these considerations in the following way:

Relationships and regrouping inform their positioning (of Agents) vis-à-vis the distribution of resources and the division of labour that circumscribe and shapes everyday practices. *Actors* is the term [Archer] uses for the individuals whose social identities, values, interests, and characters are *forged* from agential collectivities in relation to an array of organizational roles available in society at the specific point in time. Both agents and actors, however, remain anchored to persons, for neither are constructs or heuristic devices; they concern with real people even though they only deal with certain ways of being in society, and not with all the ways of being human in the world (p. 21. *Original emphases*).

This last quote raises one crucial element which will allow researchers to move on to analyse the time span from T2 to T1, according to the backward fashion followed here. The analytical process for the researcher in the previous phases of the study consists, basically, in acknowledging the subjectivity of human beings in the interpretation and the formation of their motives to act and in their actions. The descriptions that researchers make across these stages serve to characterise the morphogenesis of agency along with the interests to which agents and actors answer, in line with their subjective views. The challenge of retroductive research, as endorsed by Archer in her model, consists of making sense of the objective dimension shaping human interactions. Objectivity, in this regard, does not appeal to an epistemic argument alone about the neutrality or validity of explanatory theories, but rather to an ontological assertion of the state of *being the object of something* (of some 'subject') (Collier, 2003, p. 133). Hence, when Archer (2013a) contends that '[people] react to the situations in which they find themselves, [yet], they may remain unaware of the factors which moulded such situations' (p. 55) she reasserts the condition of the stratified emergence of social phenomena in the world. Said differently, while in spans T2 to T3 and T4, people acknowledge some of their motivations to act, they are still inhabitants of pre-existent contexts they did not contribute to creating. Hence they are exposed to forces that they might not recognise, which shape who they are and who they want to become.

The SAC configuration continues to be important to introduce the process of conditioning (in Figure 3) in the sense that, while the T1-T2 span involves discussing objective forces, this objectivity

materialises *in relation to* people. The condition of analytical dualism that ‘structure necessarily pre-dates the action(s) which transform it; and that structural elaboration necessarily post-dates those actions’ (Archer, 1995, p. 76) highlights that last clarification. The question here is not about the totality of conditioning forces existing out there (in a type of vacuum), but about the specific conditioning forces involved in the making of the events that concur with the object of the research of the current dissertation (i.e. SE). Again, the process between T1 and T2 is not static. That means that it is necessary in the analysis to decouple the moment in which SEPs and CEPs exist beyond the individuals (in the present tense) from the moment in which the mediatory power of agency brings the power of social structures into the process of the emergence of different logics of action.

Figure 5 represents that decoupling from what starts happening in T1 and the configuration of situation logics for action emerging at the beginning of social interaction (at T2). The possibility of disentangling structure and agency interaction across this time span goes along with the recognition that SEPs and CEPs, as first-order emergent properties, exist as ‘results of past actions (...) deposited in the form of current situations’ (Archer, 1995, p. 201). For Porpora (2013), to consider the likelihood of former social constructs acting on the individuals’ involuntary placement in the world emanates from the Marxist famous quip ‘that men [and women] make their history but not under circumstances of their own making’ (p. 28). And yet, human action (from the past) served as the mediatory power (the efficient cause) from which SEPs and CEPs turned out to have the properties they portray at T1 - which in itself represents the compendium of emergent properties that resulted from a former morphogenetic cycle (Knio, 2013). However, SEPs and CEPs pre-exist present social interactions, accounting ‘for what there is (materially and culturally) to be distributed (...) for the nature of the extant role array (...) at any time and the advantages/disadvantages associated with them’ (Archer, 1995, p. 201). The analytical challenge for the researcher is, hence, to uncover what these specific structures look like, and how can they objectively (i.e. the pre-existent role of teachers entails sets of responsibilities) shape human behaviour.

Figure 5. The structural conditioning of strategic action: processes of directional guidance.

First order emergent properties	Second order emergent properties	Situational logics for action
SEPs, CEPs	Necessary complementarities	Protection
	Necessary incompatibilities	Compromise
	Contingent incompatibilities	Elimination
	Contingent compatibilities	Opportunism

Source: Adapted from Archer (1995) and Truong & Knio (2016)

That last analytical move is, once again, interpretative by nature, as neither SEPs nor CEPs reveal themselves (for researchers) in an isolated fashion, but in the form of emerging logics of action (vis-à-vis agents and actors) with real powers to guide certain action paths in specific contexts. That is to say, before people engage in action, they receive objective influence from ‘distinctive situational logics, which predispose agents [and actors] towards specific courses of action for the promotion of their interests’ (Archer, 1995, p. 216). Those situations, as shown in Figure 5, vary according to necessity or complementarity delineating the relationship between different social mechanisms (or

types of emergent properties) acting on individuals, according to their involuntary placement in the world (i.e. as primary or corporate agents). The principle of analytical dualism is maintained, as those logics vary from individual to individual responding to their natural, social and practical realities (i.e. where do they fit into the structures of society?). They are of the second order as they emerge when different SEPs and CEPs come together, in the form of the compatibilities and incompatibilities between and within them. These logics all entail differentiated scenarios⁴⁷:

Protection (Concomitant complementarities): Here the parts of a system (i.e. an education system) cohere with each, pertaining to the *necessary internal linkages* between them. In her study on the Emergence of European Educational Systems, Archer (1995; 2013a) refers to these types of relationships between the Catholic Church in France and the Anglican Church of England with educational institutions. The former parties, ‘for centuries invested substantial resources - money, personnel and buildings - to institutionalise the definition of knowledge, pedagogical practices and the type/quantity of educated outputs they required’ (Archer, 1995, p. 329). That means that before liberal reforms in the continent (towards the secular state), these parties experienced a situational logic of protection, in the sense that they had incentives to support each other, generating a context leaning towards social reproduction (or morphostasis). This first example refers more clearly to dynamics that involve SEPs. Regarding CEPs, such a logic ‘occupies a congenial environment of ideas, the exploration of which, far from being fraught with danger, yields a treasure trove of reinforcement, clarification, confirmation and vindication’ (p. 234). The discussion in Chapter 7 of this dissertation on the compatibility that exists today between the discourses on the determinants of economic growth and the impact of education in the economy is an example of these ideational conditioning forces in action.

Compromise (Constraining contradictions): In this case the *necessary internal linkages* between SEPs signify immanent contradictions giving life to social systems. The Marxist theorisation of capitalist forces ‘as a contradiction between the forces and relations of production’ (Archer, 1995, p. 222) is a good illustration of this situational logic. Another good exemplar is the necessary internal contradiction between the survival of bureaucracies (seen as desirable Weberian entities to enable the functioning of institutions of the state) and taxing burdens, without which it would be hard to afford bureaucrats’ wages. Such sceneries thus generate incentives between parts that might have clashing interests to form new alliances (i.e. between the government and the entrepreneurs) to safeguard the status quo. For Archer (1995), it is often the case that such situations represent an incentive for ‘no radical changes in the resource distribution which would have dispensed with the need to compromise’ (p. 222).

⁴⁷ In her 1995 book, Archer (1995) unravels this situation logics in both the material and cultural. Hence, she introduces *Four institutional configurations and their situational logics* and *Four cultural configurations and their situational logics*. The similarity between both types of analysis (in the case of both SEPs and CEPs) means that one can group its main elements into one single presentation of situational logic in T2 of the morphogenetic/static cycle. ‘In other words, at the second-order level, CEPs and SEPs work in an identical manner as mediatory mechanisms, despite their substantive differences’ (p. 229).

Such a configuration, she contends, is, however, ‘inherently unstable’ (p. Ibid.), entailing that any faulty compromise might reverse the structural guidance for its morphostasis. In the realm of CEPs, Archer (1995) uses as a reference Durkheim's study of the history of Christianity to illustrate a similar analytical path. In it, the sociologist unveiled how ‘comprehending the Christian God entailed acquaintance with the pagan deities; grasping the symbols of the New Testament spelled immersion in classical languages’ (p. 232). The ‘inescapable [or internally related] interpenetration with classicism’ (p. 231), as this case suggests, concurs in a kind of syncretism (i.e. a reinterpretation of pagan thoughts to make them compatible with Christianity) in the form of a compromise between those who portray clashing, yet interdependent, ideas.

Elimination/ (Competitive contradictions): This is the case in which there is a predisposition for subsequent social interactions to pursue structural transformation (or morphostasis). Skinningsrud (2005) uses this situational logic to theorise about the conflicting relationships between the Church and some sectors of XIXth century Norwegian society, due to the *external forces* implied in the rising of industry and international trade. Such new context ‘increasingly required other types of qualifications than those provided by the church schools. Demand for alternative provisions could also be initiated by ideational movements, which were related to a demand for qualifications for active citizenship, such as the folk high school movement in Scandinavia’ (Skinningsrud, 2005, p. 347). An extreme example of external forces guiding towards the dynamics of elimination is of one nation invading another. In this case, if the latter loses war, morphogenetic social ‘changes are usually irreversible’ (Archer, 1995, p. 226). For the case of ideas (CEPs), a situational logic of competitive contradictions ‘is one which does not rub their noses [of ideas] in logical difficulties and keep them there’ (Archer, 1995, p. 240). Hence it confronts people to make choices (i.e. between two compelling theories, about, for instance, the drivers of economic growth).

Opportunism/ (Contingent complementarities): The last situational logic sketched in Figure 4 occurs when external forces act as contingent compatibilities ‘which prove highly compatible with the interests of particular groups’ (Archer, 1995, p. 226). Horrocks’ (2009) morphogenetic analysis of the organisational change in a British local government serves as a useful exemplar of such a scenario. The issue here was the prevailing conservative discourse of the 1980s using notions of efficiency and accountability (or the lack of them), to argue in favour of deepening centralised reforms to close regional governmental offices (or councils). However, the forces of technological advance were making their own progress, strengthening with them the idea of incorporating Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) to improve managerial practices in the private and public sectors – an idea that at that time was external to national-local government relationships. Hence there was an opportunity for local bureaucrats to form new alliances that would strengthen their argument that they could build new technological capabilities to solve local governance matters. Consequently, they ‘took advantage of the resulting emergent properties to pursue forms of strategic action aimed at promoting their ideas more widely and gaining the resources to translate their ideas into

practice' (Horrocks, 2009, p. 50). The resulting social context was one leaning towards morphogenetic forces to deepen decentralisation reforms.

The formation of this logic of actions, it is worth mentioning, clearly entails the convergence of both SEPs and CEPs. This specification is necessary to emphasise the idea that, while one should avoid conflating the cultural with the material structures of society, both of these types of forces act (to a certain extent) in parallel when conditioning, but not determining subsequent behaviour. The determination of which of these types of forces has a greater weight, vis-à-vis the vested interests of individuals and collectives of people, becomes a matter of empirical research. However, given the structuralist *bias* of the MGA, the approach does concede a major ontological strength to the power of the material structures of society in shaping cultural expressions. In Archer's (1995) wording, 'without the structural stimulus, rooted in the disjunction between the two domains this elaborative sequence would not have got off the ground for agents with the power to promote it would have been lacking' (Archer, 1995, p. 315).

With all these elements in mind, the analytical move in the hands of the researcher entails moving from T2 to T1 by theorising about what these situational logics look alike in aggregate, and to then unpack them in specific SEPs and CEPs in action. Given that these structural forces, as isolated ontological entities, are non-observable, researchers ought to theorise about their existence through their empirical expression in the form of second order emergent properties. From such a perspective, this conditioning moment in T1, 'corresponds to the domain of the real in critical realism' (Knio, 2013, p. 859). Of course, the study of these structural conditions, and the way in which they end up shaping human behaviours, is one that cannot be exhausted by only referring to processes in T2, but also through the accounts and the actions of actors and agents across T2 to T4. In the end, the elaboration process occurring in this last morphogenetic moment is an emergent property of the whole structure and agency interaction process. That means that the elements of the present state of social structures supply additional clues to those elements that operated in the past. It is also worth pointing out that, given that T4 is a result of 'a combination of the tendential and contingent, the aim cannot be to furnish predictive formulae but rather an explanatory methodology for the researcher to employ' (Archer, 1995, p. 294). The implication here is that, within a CR ontology, social theorists cannot predict the future, at least not in the terms that positivism suggests (with *t* statistics, and margin errors). Yet, by acknowledging the multiple complexities involved in the emergence of social phenomena, scholars working with an MGA can still comment on what could *qualitatively* happen in future cycles.

Given the abstract nature of the discussion introduced in this section, readers might value a (brief) discussion of an example of social research applying the MGA. The challenge here, as already mentioned in the Introduction of this document, is that the literature that puts a morphogenetic logic in practice is rather scarce. Some recent examples of the MGA in action are represented in Horrocks' (2009) and Edwards Jr & Brehm's (2015) work which, nonetheless, offers little detail on how they made sense of specific concepts of the approach - in particular, SEPs and CEPs⁴⁸. To

⁴⁸ In Horrocks' (2009) view of his own research project, it was hard to apply some of Archer's concepts. As he contends, '[w]orking to Archer's definition meant accepting a rigid approach, as well as working with three types of emergent

avoid misunderstandings - their work, like any other, is an interpretation of the original framework - it is better to quote Archer's (2015) original work which, luckily in this context, has shown some recent empirical developments. In that regard, the author's exploration of the social and political dynamics of what she coins *Late Modernity* provides fresh insights into the social processes occurring throughout the phases in Figure 3. Her analysis here delves into social interactions between software developers, as corporate agents in pursuit of innovation in the virtual online platforms, and entrepreneurs, who place their expectations of monetary return when working with new online technologies in first place. In this case,

Digital science originated in the universities and, from the beginning not all research scientists embraced big business despite their reliance upon capitalization for the diffusion of their innovations (...). From the original group of 'hackers', can be traced the origins of new Corporate agents who very quickly articulated alternative aims (the cyber-Commons, open-sourcing of knowledge, peer-to-peer production and subsidiarity) and implemented them in new organizational forms (General Licensing, Wikipedia and, eventually, social networking media). All of these were predicated upon 'win-win' scenarios; that the cultural sharing of digital resources enhanced everybody and impoverished no-one. As they advanced and diversified, these too introduced their own 'double morphogenesis', with its dual aspects of re-grouping tracts of the global population into novel types of alliance formation (some to become Corporate agents) and transmuting the personal motivation of a significant proportion of Primary agents (Archer, 2015, pp. 147-148)

Relevant to this example is the context within which agential potential transformations start to take place. That is the situational logic operating since T1 (in overlap with T2), which, according to Archer (2015), emerged about three decades ago when the synergy between digital innovation and nascent new finance-lead industries signified a new potential to raise economic productivity and growth. While the relationship between these two forces originally entailed a contingent compatibility (i.e. before innovation became a determinant of economic success), 'the new forms of globalized capitalism and the generic innovations of digital science *became increasingly interdependent and collaborative*' (p. 141. *Emphasises added*). Nonetheless, as Archer (2015) contends, 'collaboration is not co-operation' (p. 141), and in this particular setting these parties (also) had opposing vested interests. In the case of software elaborations (some precursors to Wikipedia, MySpace and Facebook), one crucial driver for their activity was the 'diffusion of their innovations' (p. 136). Industries, on the other hand, were driven by profit, a rationale that envisioned the strengthening

property – structural, cultural and people's (SEPs, CEPs and PEPs in Archer's shorthand) – and therefore three types of generative mechanism/ causal power. This highlights the second dimension of the morphogenetic approach that proved problematic: identifying from the data available all of the features of SEPs, CEPs and PEPs that Archer stipulates, and thus the mechanisms that were likely to be causally efficacious to the case study' (p. 52). This makes it clear that the author struggled to apply elements of the approach, from which it logically follows that he did not include an explanation on how he tried to make sense of them. In the end, he did not talk about the conditioning stage of the MGA.

of legal patents and copyright laws - restrictions to the diffusion of innovations - ‘to ensure a calculable market by temporarily *freezing* uncertainty’ (p. 143. *Original emphasis*).

The double morphogenesis of agency hence describes the process through which both parties made attempts to reshape their actor-agent relationships in order to make their way in the *Knowledge Society* or the *Information Age*. For instance, ‘[f]rom the original group of *hackers* [*or Primary Agents*], can be traced the origins of new Corporate agents who very quickly articulated alternative aims (...) and implemented them in new organizational forms’ (Archer, 2015, pp. 148-149. *Original emphasis*). Resisting copyright laws, for instance, became a political insignia and with it the emergence of an Open Source Movement ‘based upon software source codes being publicly available (...) to all and enabling their adaption to specific ends as defined by users themselves’ (p. 148). The diffusion of information on the world wide web also represented an opportunity for other corporate groups of more conscious and interlinked users to significantly push towards further forms of corporate capitalism.⁴⁹ Already Corporate Agents (such as corporations), initially tried strengthening the influence of protection laws, but suddenly understood a more fructiferous actions path linked to their profit-seeking rationale. Archer (2015) writes that ‘[a]lthough it has often been noted that the [Social Networks] can catalyse public demonstrations, they work through disaggregation and re-aggregation for commercial purposes rather than fostering the development of new Corporate Agents’ (pp. 154, 155). Commercialisation through social media, and not in competition with it, signified an opportunity for big corporations to resist further morphogenetic processes through new forms of web marketing.

2.4. Open systems and realist theorisation: the realist design of the thesis

One critique that emerges from a previous application of the morphogenetic analysis indicates that, while its ontology proves its abstract value ‘when applied to an empirical case study the matter (...) [is] not so straightforward’ (Horrocks, 2009, p. 54). Here he refers, specifically, to the difficulties he experienced in making sense of SEPs and CEPs in the empirical findings of his analysis. Other voices have gone even deeper into questioning the prevailing ‘relatively flat spatio-temporal ontology’ (Jessop B. , 2005, p. 48) of Archer’s conceptualisation, or its ‘rather episodic, disjointed and discontinuous view of agency’ (Hay, 2002, p. 126). While the intention here is not to suggest that an MGA should be immune to critiques or possible reconceptualisations, a reflection on these comments serves as an opportunity to sustain further its adequacy as a DSMT for this project.

⁴⁹ In Archer’s words, ‘Unbridled opportunism has indeed induced a double morphogenesis because the continuing economic crisis has re-grouped the population of the developed world. Fifty percent of those in southern Europe are unemployed, most Europeans fear for their job security, occupational pensions are of diminishing value, some have had their houses repossessed and the young cannot get a mortgage to put them on the housing ladder, social security has been rolled further back, the cost of utilities rises and the burden of austerity measures leaves the poor worse-off, though professional incomes have also deteriorated in real terms (...) Virtual Communities in the form of networking sites may indeed perform an integrative role through furnishing friendship, acceptance and understanding of distant others (...). More important here, is the contribution of virtual communities in fostering new Corporate agents that emphasise reciprocity among members and perform the novel task of countering the individualism inherent in growing heterogeneity (...). These new Corporate agents work by combining dispersed forms of specialist concerns into interactive support groups that are morphogenetic in influencing mainstream practices. (Archer, 2015, pp. 152, 150).

Before delving into the specificities of the research design, which is the main goal of this last section, it is worth answering additional questions pertaining to the logics of realist theorising.

2.4.1. Counterfactual thinking: the research question & the sample of the study

To briefly comment on the first critique cited above, Hay's (2002) and Jessop's (2005) views of the MGA rely on problematic understandings of realism. This assertion can be (at least partially) sustained by the way in which the alternative they both endorse, the Strategic-Relational Approach (SRA), fails in the critical points they raise (a *type of* flat ontology, a narrow conception of human agency⁵⁰. For McAnulla (2005), '[i]n an admirable desire to overcome dualism and tendencies to determinism or intentionalism [Hay] appears to have followed Giddens down the path of eliding or conflating structure and agency to a point where distinguishing between their respective powers becomes difficult' (p. 37). Belfrage & Hauf (2017) raise a similar comment pertaining Jessop's work⁵¹. Likewise, when assessing their interpretation of Archer's literature, it is possible to argue that it reveals a partial (or, perhaps, outdated) reading of the conceptual richness of her conceptualisation (McAnulla, 2002; 2005).

In light of the comments in the last paragraph, it is more pressing to elaborate upon Horrock's (2009) critique and his *naïve* expectation of trying to encapsulate or typify emergent phenomena in rather *close* categories. An ontology of open and stratified social systems bears, precisely, opposite implications. Living in an open system means that 'it is hardly possible to create a social situation where one can systematically manipulate and control the influences from all conceivable social factors, in order to study [their] effects' (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002, p. 35). This is equally the case for the non-possibility to observe underlying mechanisms at work (such as SEPs and CEPs), but only to have an indirect approximation to them *via* their effects on actual (and observable) phenomena. None of this is new to CR thinkers, nor is the need of realist researchers to resort to transfactual and counterfactual research techniques to make sense of *what is absent* (Bhaskar, 2008; Sayer, 1992). The use of the linguistic figure of a metaphor is, therefore, highly relevant to illustrate what the process of realist theorisation (by combining abduction, retroduction and the MGA), looks like:

⁵⁰ Furthermore, McAnulla (2005) argues that 'Hay's discussion of ontology commits him to a perspective that remains limited to the realm of the actual. Put another way, his ontology denies the existence of underlying structures which may be unobservable' (p. 32). Such an observation becomes evident when one delves into his/her? relational model and how it shows no interest in untangling the autonomous properties of structure and agency, nor shows interest in envisioning an *emergentist* ontology. Furthermore, as the SRA elaborates on actors (rather than agents, actors and people), it focuses its attention on a parallel interplay between social positions (of both individuals or collectivities) and strategic selective contexts. This could be described as central conflation.

⁵¹ These authors use Jessop's relational analysis and make one of their comments on the conceptualisation of human agency relevant for the current discussion. In their opinion, 'What was not specified by [Jessop's cultural political economy approach] was that the structurally inscribed conditions for (differentially reflexive) strategic calculation may be such that actors can become inclined to embrace unconstructive criticism targeting existing discursive rules and routines as a strategic tool' (p. 265). That is a debate that Archer explicitly addresses by introducing the concept of *situational logics*.

.... scientists require a way of introducing an intelligible theoretical vocabulary in order to conceptualize the hypothetical unobservable entities, mechanisms, and so on, governing the observable behavior of their subject matter. The key to seeing how this takes place is an understanding of generative metaphor (...). A generative metaphor is not merely an ornate expression of similarities and analogies its author was already aware of, but is the source of new perceptions of similarity and analogy, picking out similarities and analogies that were unknown until the metaphor pointed them out and thereby brought them to the author's attention. (...) Although the hypothetical unobservables postulated by scientists cannot be directly attended to and described, the use of generative metaphor allows scientists to conceptualize them in terms of (their knowledge of) other, more familiar entities, mechanisms, and so on (Lewis, 1996, p. 493).

It is relevant to highlight from this last assertion not the use of metaphors *per se* to make sense of (for instance) underlying mechanisms, but the idea that, given that scientists deal with the unobservable, they need to resort to the use of language to theorise about society. Following López (2003), '[t]he specificity of social theoretical practice is its attempt to conceptually articulate meaning systems capable of representing and explaining social phenomena' (p. 79). As knowledge of generative mechanisms needs to transcend observation (hence is transfactual), the study of open systems deals with *what if* questions. That requires counterfactual, and not associational, thinking, as such questions are concerned 'not merely with what happens to be associated with what, for that may be accident, but with whether the associations could be otherwise' (Sayer, 2000, pp. 16-17). The answer to Horrocks' (2009) concern emerges from this type of reasoning. That is to say, given that entities such as SEPs and CEPs transcend human perception, it is not possible to observe them. That is precisely the aim of social theorising; to theorise about their mechanisms and their effects. All of this signifies that a useful research question to guide the current research is:

Figure 6. Main research question

How to explain the persistence of poor school performance in National Standardised Exams in municipalities in Northern Colombia?

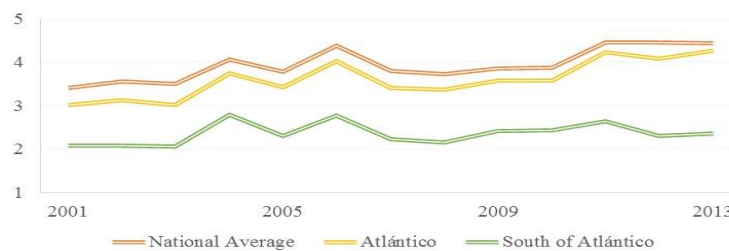
From a strict ontological perspective, the question could have been phrased as *What does the existence of persistent school failure in Northern Colombia presuppose?* In line with Sayer's (2000) discussion of realist research methodologies, such an inquiry implies referring not to the association between variables, but to the necessity for particular phenomena to emerge. The decision to choose the phrasing in Figure 6 responds, hence, more to a thematic (and political) desire to restate the fact that this is an inquiry that mainstream scholarship has failed to solve. Such a general inquiry should profit from more specific questions pertaining, for example, to the non-linear relationship between structure and agency and their autonomous emergent properties. These sub-questions are presented in the next section, with the discussion on the research design.

At this point it is also important to talk about the study sample as implied in the research question - municipalities in Northern Colombia. Here the thesis resorts to Lawson's (2009) notion of contrast explanation to justify the selection of two municipalities in the south of the department of Atlántico. According to this scholar,

Rather than to seek to explain some outcome x , the goal is to explain some contrast x *rather than* y and to do so in conditions where we might have expected the contrasted outcomes to be the same, because, as far as we could discern, they shared the same causal history. The approach thus turns on explaining differences in outcomes, but differences that, from the point of view of existing understandings, are considered to be surprising, noteworthy, inconsistent, disturbing, doubt-inducing or otherwise interesting. Thus, for example, the goal is to explain not the yield of crops in the field but why the crop yield is, say, twice as high as the average down one side of the field; to explain not movements in unemployment in total in a given area, but why unemployment in this area, in a particular time interval, grew far more rapidly in, say, the north than everywhere else (Lawson, p. 412. *Original emphasis*).

The notion of a contrast carries with it a strong epistemological argument to define some research parameters (i.e. sample size) including, for instance, particular features that make certain cases more interesting to study than others. Due to this thesis' intention in using the MGA as a DSMT (and to create a middle-range theory), Lawson's (2009) methodological advice about focusing on *contrasts* concurred in the selection of two municipalities in the country that show persistent school failure (See Figure 7). The expectation among policymakers, one could argue, is that investments in education over time result in the improvement in the performance of students in test scores. Hence, working with cases that reveal the complete opposite represents an opportunity for researchers to identify and navigate more easily across the contrasting effects of social mechanisms at work. Such a situation, this thesis argues, offers the researcher a suitable setting to start exploring the epistemic and methodological advantages of CR in applied research (a goal that is implicit in this thesis' aim to build a provisional, not definitive, (middle) range theory).

Figure 7. Average School Ranking (2001-2013)



Source: Author's calculation with data from ICFES.

The whole discussion will profit from the advantages of a case study strategy to study complex phenomena (Ackroyd and Karlsson 2014) and makes use of a purposive sampling strategy ‘to build systems through which sets of ideas can be judged against evidence’ (Emmel, 2013, p. 159). The problem at stake is the phenomenon of persistent poor school performance in the country. Hence the convenience of studying cases of persistent school failure is not to create statistical comparisons, as in econometric research, but to delve into the study of causal mechanisms at work. As Emmel (2013) asserts, ‘[r]ealist sampling strategies seek out extensive accounts that expand upon and develop the descriptive baseline of the chosen cases, providing insight into the ways in which phenomena are experienced, explained, perceived, and accepted in particular contexts and circumstances’ (p. 140). Such a rationale coheres with the thesis’s aim of exploring the application of a new methodology, at least for the Latin American context, and starting a process of theory building (to arrive at a middle-range theory). According to Easton (2010), working with a few cases provides the opportunity for researchers to engage in a process of theory creation:

A single case study must be able to stand on its own. The key opportunity it has to offer is to understand a phenomenon in depth and comprehensively (...) Relationship with existing theory is important. Where little exists then one case can be enough to begin the process of theory creation. Where there exists well-articulated theory, particular aspects of that theory, the entities, their powers, the nature of the relationships and the overall mechanisms can be targeted and attempts made to elucidate one or all of them in a single case. More generally, a pragmatic approach can be adopted. If the objective is to advance theory then one should be able to say which theoretical aspects one wishes to address and how will that be served by undertaking one case study compared with many (...) A single case study must be able to stand (pp. 119-127).

Figure 8. Department of Atlántico located on the Colombian map



Source: Google maps. The Department of Atlántico, the region highlighted in red in Northern Colombia. Its capital city is Barranquilla

Ideas to start a process of theorisation emerge from previous research, from secondary data (i.e. on the history of education in the region) and the experience that the researchers acquire through fieldwork after interacting with key informants and members of the community. The inquiry in this study hence focuses on two municipalities from the southern region of the *Departamento del Atlántico*, located on the Caribbean Coast in Northern Colombia (see Map in Figure 8). School failure is a well-documented phenomenon in this area. The Observatory of the Colombian Caribbean Education (OCCE) showed that by 2012 only 11.8% of the schools in the whole Caribbean region were rated as good, very good or excellent (the figure was 21.9% for the Department of Atlántico). The national average was 31.6% (Said-Hung, Valencia, Turbay, & Justo, 2014). Administrative data from the Institution for the Evaluation of Education (ICFES) shows that in the period 2001-2013, senior students at the national level performed 67% better in standardised tests than their peers in the south of Atlántico (the site of the study) (Figure 10). Furthermore, Ramírez & Téllez's (2007) time series analysis (with data that dates from the first decades of the XXth century) reveals how the Department of Atlántico carries a historical lag in various types of secondary education indicators.

2.4.2. *Analytical dualism: the basis to guide the application of research methods*

Many of the tenets of CR and its epistemological reflections entails a research design that brings to life the possibility of informing a retroductive exercise into the causes of the persistence of school failure. In that spirit, Archer's (2013a) work on the *Social Origins of Educational Systems* provides some methodological advice when engaging in social research by avoiding the types of structure and agency conflation that she so eagerly criticises in her original 1995 piece. In her words,

Although the statements of historic actors are used for purposes of identification and location, they cannot be employed as a substitute for analysis. The prior educational context is not assumed to be exactly as contemporary actors described it. This is not merely owing to the lack of objectivity, the bias, or the inaccuracy of historical commentators. It is because, as was argued in the introduction, social contexts cannot simply be reduced to what contemporary actors think, or thought about them, for this would be to endorse the 'autonomy of the present tense'. Actors react to the situations in which they find themselves; they may remain unaware of the factors which moulded such situations or of some of their properties. These socio-educational contexts must be investigated independently, and in doing so the sociological task is not just to record how they were viewed by people at the time but also to conceptualize how this broader context structured the actual situation in which each group found itself vis-à-vis education, helped them to view it in a particular way, and led them to seek change (p. 55).

The research design (Figure 10) of the current dissertation draws on the principles that underlie that last excerpt. The quote reflects many of the ontological principles of CR and the MGA, primarily analytical dualism and (complementary to it) the notion of stratification, to study the emergence of social phenomena (i.e. the persistence of school failure). The idea that *people react to*

situations justifies focusing part of the analysis on the way students, parents and teachers react to the educational dynamics of specific contexts (i.e. schools in certain regions of the country). That is the emphasis of PART II of the dissertation, which includes six months of ethnographic research in three schools in Northern Colombia, all of which exhibit persistence in the problem of poor school performance in (at least) the last two decades. PART II includes two Chapters. Chapter Three is based on a group conversation with local actors to help the researcher identify perceptions of the educational challenges in the region. Chapter Four deepens the analysis of the previous Chapter by delving into classroom dynamics to observe the social interactions of teachers and students.

Studying day-to-day practices of people is one powerful methodological tool to escape from the voids of determinism inherent in pre-assuming behavioural traits (i.e. rational behaviour) so common in social theory (Porpora, 2015). Acknowledging the importance of *practices at the everyday level* is therefore crucial ‘to raise important questions about (...) power relations’ (Elias & Roberts, 2016, p. 790) that underpin the logic of the market and the state (and its educational institutions) at work. Furthermore, as Archer (1995) contends, ‘when actors produce social practices they necessarily draw upon rules and resources and thus inevitably invoke the whole matrix of structural properties at that instant’ (p. 87). Following the tenets of analytical dualism, as it is through people that social structures exert their power, Part II opens the way for the exploration of social structures in Part III. This task, back to Archer’s quote, needs to be informed by the accounts of agency, but cannot be exhausted by relying only on their subjective views about the reality around them. Chapters Five and Six are therefore, independently of each other, devoted to the study of the socio-educational contexts for action. Here the investigator relied on secondary data, but also on the collection of primary sources of information from regional legislative archives (from 1980 to 2014) and on newspaper data (from 2001 to 2014). That same notion of independence from each other comes reflected in the way each chapter is written, as almost independent research pieces to fit into the broader research puzzle.

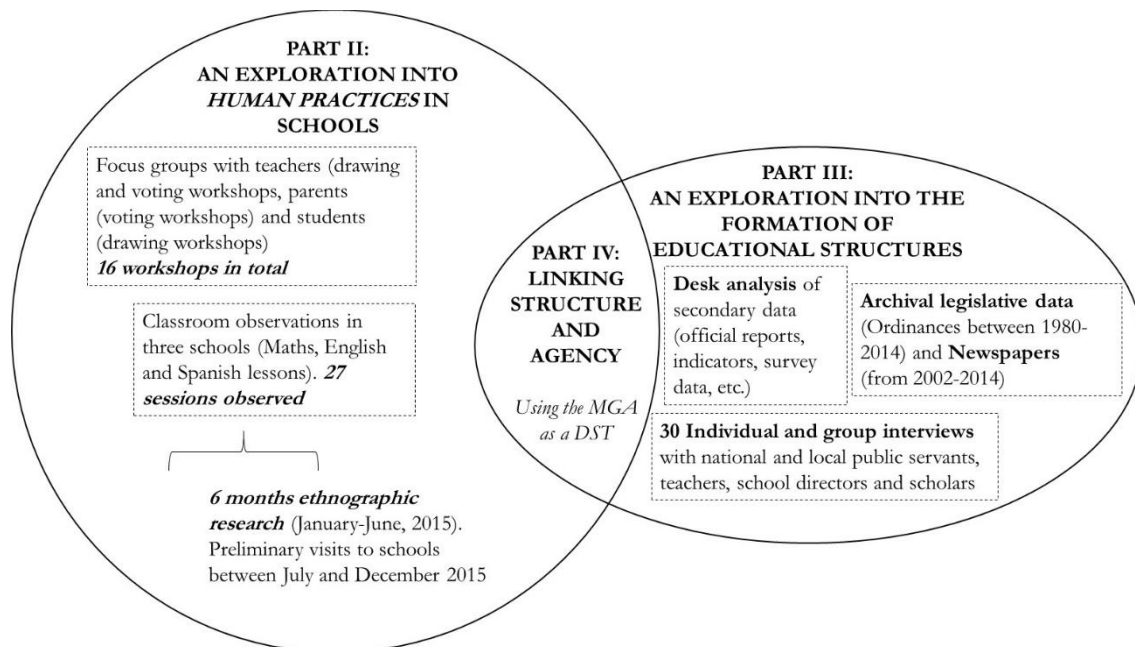
Part IV delves into the conceptualisation of how broader contexts structured ‘the actual situation in which each group found itself vis-à-vis education [and] helped them to view it in a particular way, and led them to seek change’ (Archer, 2013a, p. 55). Chapter VII of the dissertation deploys a morphogenetic analysis to theorise about the causal linkages between SEPs, CEPs and PEPs. However, it is important to insist, the endorsement of the MGA as a DSMT and not an Explanatory Programme, as discussed above, limits the extent to which this thesis can be classified as a morphogenetic analysis of education in Colombia. The study, once again, aims to explore the strengths of the CR in education by providing a middle-range theory about the operation of educational mechanisms in the country, and hence motivate new types of education policy debates. In doing so, the thesis focusses on providing (at least some indicative) answers to the following research sub-questions, both of which reflect the intention to undertake a non-conflationary study of structure and agency interactions in the field.

Figure 9. Research sub-questions

1. *What type of behavioural guidance (or situational logics) emerge from educational structures acting upon the members (i.e. teachers, parents, teachers) of failing schools in Northern Colombia?*
2. *How do local agents (at schools) mediate the conditioning power of educational structures?*

The shape of the Venn diagram in Figure 10 is deliberate to represent this thesis argument to start theorising about the persistence of poor school performance in Northern Colombia, by first focusing (with a certain level of depth) on day-to-day practices. PART II is represented in a bigger circle than Parts III and IV, not to suggest that the workload in these last stages is smaller than in the first (empirical) phase of the project, but rather to highlight that, presupposing these ontological and epistemological arguments, most of the primary data collection for the research was from the ethnographic exercise in schools.

Figure 10. Research methodology and methods: a scheme



2.4.3. *Making (realist) sense of data: a brief note*

One major contribution of this study consists of deploying an analytic framework with which to analyse qualitative data using the ontology of CR. The operational guidance on who to do empirical research on is a topic that is rarely addressed by scholars in the fields of political science, political economy and critical development studies (Patomäki, 2003; Hudson & Leftwich, 2014). It is clear that the claim here is not to favour rigid (or highly structured) data analysis techniques, as most of these are only suitable when researching closed systems. The ontological principles discussed in Chapter One further imply that given elements such as the

reflexive action of human beings, it is not possible to establish *one size fits all* recipes to analyse interview data, as is the case in a deductive research methodological framework.

The answer cannot be, however, to dismiss all types of *more systematic* approximations to data analysis. That is a type of argument commonly employed by the postmodern and social constructionist vogue to give epistemic (absolute) priority to the reflexivity and the positionality of the researcher (Cruickshank, 2003a)⁵². The problem with such trends, as Arsel and Dasgupta (2015) have recently declared, is that it falls into *critique for the sake of critique*, ‘missing the significance of continuing with and contributing to the urgent need to advance a material agenda for emancipatory development’ (p. 646). From the perspective of CR, this is because when analysts rely (much) more on their own subjectivity (which is, partly, inevitable) they leave aside the (emergent) properties of the research context that transcend the perception of people acting upon it (such as the researcher himself). That type of conflation obfuscates possible knowledge accumulation.

The distinction between the causal powers of social objects and their causal efficacy is crucial to delineate this document’s proposal on data analysis. The stratified notion of causality presented in this research project entails a distinction between the necessarily internal relations pertaining the emergence of causal powers (i.e. the mechanics of a car engine) and the action of contingent (or external) forces (a driver *might* fuel the car) to activate them. Hence, ‘[r]esearchers are dealing (...) with structures with independent powers, though these are not necessarily exercised, and people with independent powers, though these in turn are not necessarily exercised’ (Scott, 2007, p. 143). However, stratification also means that the emergence of social events (i.e. school failure) is a resulting process dependent on the action of human agency embedded in (and not pre-determined by) pre-existent material and ideational social structures. Hence Willmott’s (1999a) substantive assertion that ‘one can talk about the agential *mediation* of structure because emergent structural properties only work through people, not in spite of people’ (p. 9). That is not to reduce SEPs to PEPs but to suggest these are both interlinked parts of a totality (i.e. the phenomena of school failure) and that the study of causal powers needs to take into consideration how they *refract* upon each other in the emergence of that totality, as the following excerpt contends:

the common claim made by critical realists that the social world is open implies
that a number of researchers can follow a realist methodology but still

⁵² According to Cruickshank (2003a), ‘[t]he key ideas of this vogue are as follows: first, that there is no rational self, and instead the self is a decentred contingency which cannot transcend its socio-historical location; and, secondly, that what is taken to be knowledge is a reflection of the prevailing discourse or language game. From this it is maintained that the task of the researcher is more about constructing a narrative than discovering the truth. This means that social scientists must use qualitative research to understand the reality constructed by the group studied, rather than claiming to discover the truth about a group. In constructing a narrative about the reality of the group studied, the social origin of the researcher will influence the narrative, and the outcome will be as much about the researcher’s biography as the people studied. In which case, it may be best for the researcher to study people from the same social group, so that the origin of the researcher does not clash with the reality constructed by the group studied’ (p. 1).

nevertheless produce competing causal accounts of the same social phenomenon (...) But what can be suggested (...) is that dialectical explanation seeks to combine an analysis of concrete open systems with abstract closed systems (totalities, in Bhaskar's later language) by arguing that even contingent concrete forms refract a higher level contradictory essence in its own unique manner (...). This is to treat the research context as a self-contained (external) totality that nevertheless refracts the wider totality of which it is a part (Roberts 2014, 12, 14. *Original emphases*).

The point here is not to fall into epistemic positions defending crude objectivism (i.e. the superiority of quantitative *unbiased* research), but to acknowledge the dialectical connection between historical processes and concrete events. That is to say, the accounts of social actors refer to particular social structures with real causal powers (Bhaskar, 2010)⁵³. Empirical research consists, hence, in studying how 'abstract structures undergo change [or exert causal efficacy] through concrete spacetime-relations' (Roberts 2014, 6). Within such dialectical logic, the accounts of social structures can still include different descriptions - in the end, researchers are reflexive subjects - but still, these descriptions will refer to (at least) similar understandings of the research context. By distancing itself from thick constructivism (or relativism), dialectical CR opens the door to conversations and knowledge accumulation about the past and the possible directions towards which social structures evolve (Roberts, 2014). Ignoring dialectics is the reason why previous attempts to analyse qualitative data using CR realism as a back-up paradigm failed to transcend the vogue of social constructivism (two examples lie in the works of Crinson (2007) and Fletcher (2017)).

Two concrete implications derive from this whole discussion. The first is the need to situate all data within the potential operational field of external forces (such as SEPs, CEPs or PEPs) by *delineating preliminary hunches*, or hypotheses, about the way dialectical counterparts (i.e. structures towards agency) operate in that particular context. Bhaskar (2010) talks about 'the need to refer to a multiplicity of (successive) causes, mechanisms and theories in the explanation of the phenomenon' (p. 4). This step is a consequence of with the necessity of abductive research to 'interpret a phenomenon in the light of a frame of interpretation (rule), [taking into account that] the frame of interpretation constitutes one (...) [of] several possible interpretations' (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002, p. 90). The framing of such hypotheses necessarily relies on preliminary research, as well as on valuable insights (from secondary sources, conversations, etc.) about the specific topic under scrutiny. In Vincent & Wapshott's (2014) example of the study of labour *markets* in the UK, the reference to mainstream labour theory represented an opportunity for the authors to initiate processes for abducting and retroducting

⁵³ Bhaskar (2010) writes that 'In everyday discourse in the pragmatics of explanation one will always be abstracting from some causally relevant features, that is, features of the total situation which, had they been different, would have prevented or modified the effect in question. One is typically looking for what makes a difference in the particular case, against a background of assumed normality, and given the purposes of the explanatory enquiry' (p. 14).

new understandings of the phenomena. The fieldwork stage of their study consisted, hence, of making an effort to make thicker descriptions of the research setting to refine (or even rebuke) former theoretical appraisals explaining specific observed patterns.

The second implication implies going one step back into the process of data collection itself. The dialectics in analytical dualism also entails reflecting upon the way researchers dialogue with interviewees. For example, given that the experiences and perceptions of local actors emerge in pre-existent contexts (i.e. an ongoing education policy), one of the researcher's goals is to understand the way in which agents mediate the properties of those social and cultural structures acting upon them. The problem, however, is that actors are not always aware of many of the factors and elements that contribute to moulding their behaviour (Archer, 2013). In this sense, Pawson (1996) and Smith & Elger (2014) contend that dialoguing with people in the field demands a combination of structured and non-structured interviewing logics. While using only the former implies addressing interviewees as passive agents that validate pre-existent theories, using only the latter implies reducing the properties of social structures to the accounts that local actors make of them. One key aspect, is, hence, 'the creation of a situation in which the theoretical postulates/conceptual structures under investigation are open for inspection in a way that allows the respondent to make an informed and critical account of them' (Pawson 1996, 313). The empirical sections of these texts provide further details on the operationalisation of these analytical logics.

2.5. Conclusion

This Chapter is the longest one of the document. The analytical effort to link the ontological implications discussed in Chapter One, with the methodological endeavour of the current doctoral dissertation signifies one valuable contribution to the project. While the literature on CR is quite prominent, few authors engage in efforts to explicitly link their abstract contributions to a research setting able to unleash retroduction and abduction through concrete social theories (Martin, 2016). One remarkable exception is Danermark et al's. (2002) methodological text that, however, only discusses general insights regarding some of these linkages, in particular in the data analysis stage.

Throughout this Chapter, the author has highlighted the potential of Archer's (1995) Morphogenetic/Static approach to address the question of the persistence of school failure in Northern Colombia using CR lenses. The research design profits from the tenets of analytical dualism to delineate a multistage strategy to study the autonomous properties and the emergent powers of SEPs, CEPs and PEPs. The dialectical move addressed in the last section requires, however, that the study of these ontological forms should not follow a particular order (i.e. first agency and then structure, or vice versa). Therefore, the organisation of the text into Parts (II, III, IV) does not intend to suggest the superlative importance of one topic (i.e. structure) over the other (i.e. agency), but emerges from a simple sense of practicality (somehow, the thesis must be written).

The following chapters hence aim to deal with the challenge made in the conclusion of Chapter One to provide an alternative account of educational failure removed from the flaws of

existent (and overridingly positivist) research in the field. That objective is limited, however, to the building of a first middle-range theory (or a first attempt at theorisation) about educational failure in Colombia, as justified above. It is important to note that so far the use of language in the text has been rather abstract and specialised, but that should not (and will not) be the case in the presentation of the empirical chapters of the text (with the possible exception of Chapter Seven when the MGA returns to the scene). Such a move is somehow intentional. As López contends (2003), ‘due to the language-borne nature of the practice of social theory, it is crucial to develop an understanding of the specificity of the discursive and conceptual processes, the potentialities and constraints, that emerge at this level of theoretical practice’ (p. 75)⁵⁴. Because of the existence of open systems in which the social researcher operates, the development of particular forms of communication helps in elucidating the operation of abstract social mechanisms at work (such as the discussion of the Metaphor in Section 2.4.1). However, it is in the interest of the research to be able to communicate (most of) the empirical findings in a more or less accessible language so that they can help inform multiple debates about the operation of education policy in Colombia and beyond.

⁵⁴ As he further points out, ‘given its language-borne nature, theoretical practice cannot be understood merely in terms of this mapping in social space. The specificity of social theoretical practice is its attempt to conceptually articulate meaning systems capable of representing and explaining social phenomena’ (López J. , 2003, p. 79).

PART II: PRACTICES AT THE EVERYDAY LEVEL

Part II of the dissertation studies elements (i.e. perceptions) of human agency in schools in Northern Colombia. The study sample is three schools located in two municipalities in the region, characterised by the persistence of underachievement by the students in National Standardised Exams. In line with the discussion in the last the sections of Chapter Two (pertaining to the sample size), the exploratory character of the research justified focusing on only a few cases of local educational systems that reflect persistence in school performance. According to Easton (2010), '[if] the objective is to advance theory then one should be able to say which theoretical aspects one wishes to address and how will that be served by undertaking one case study [or few of them] compared with many' (p. 127).

The discussions in the previous chapters also raised the issue of the scarcity of reflections in the literature on the *mechanics* - referring to procedures, not mechanistic frameworks - of data analysis vis-à-vis Archer's methodological proposal. The conclusion from that debate concurs with Propora's (2001) assertion that '[a] realist sociology would be epistemologically distinguished not as much at the level of concrete methods as in its embrace of interparadigmatic dialogue' (p. 263). The distinction between methodologies understood as research strategies, and methods as data analysis tools (Sumner & Tribe, 2008) is of extreme relevance in justifying the empirical endeavour of the chapters of this Part of the dissertation (likewise for Part III). If one understands the MGA as a methodology to help marshal out SAC configurations in social research, then the deployment of Archer's approach needs an additional discussion about methods and their use in informing different stages of the general strategy of the thesis (see Figure 10). Realists (at least some of them) refer to this issue in the following way:

The (...) implication for method is that one has to be a (...) pluralist, one can't just assert that, for example, only qualitative interviewing is permissible. Of course, it may well be the case that qualitative techniques are immensely useful for some aspects of the problem you want to investigate. At the level of experience, qualitative methods (and there have been important recent advances here) are going to be indispensable, but if you want to produce a full explanation you will frequently have to adopt broader methods, triangulated methods, a variety of different methods in order to tease out the different levels of analysis and the real, deep causal processes at work (Archer, Sharp, Stones, & Woodiwiss, 1999, p. 12)

It is hence important for the reader not to conflate the idea of using research methods in a way that, when put together, they allow for the building of a morphogenetic understanding of the problem at stake with the need to apply a morphogenetic logic to analyse every piece of information collected during fieldwork. That is to say, there is no need to expect a morphogenetic type of analysis for all different types of data. What research methods *do* need to offer the researcher is some sense of potential dialogue between the stages of structure and agency exploration. Hence, for example, the (independent) exploration of human perception should help to generate hypotheses about the conditioning power of social structures. Similarly,

the (independent) study of social structures should help the researcher to build hypotheses in the way that they shape human behaviour in specific human settings. These types of analyses come together in Chapter Four when using the tools of the MGA (as a DMST) to contribute to the building of a middle-range theory about the persistence of poor school performance in Northern Colombia.

That being said, Chapters Three and Four in this Part of the dissertation illustrate innovations in research methods and techniques to analyse qualitative data referring to the experience of individuals in the context of certain educational structures. The discussion about dialectics in CR (See Chapter Two) is important here. While these analyses contribute to the causal inquiry of the study, the lack of examples in the literature on how to carry out abductive and retroductive research in the field necessarily makes the present exploration one that also raises elements that contribute to the still premature discussion on the implementation of realist qualitative research tools. As also stated in the previous chapters, the intention in the next Parts of the thesis (II and III) is to use a more universal language (hence leaving aside, for the time being, the concepts from the MGA). CR and the MGA are frameworks to help the analytical endeavour of the thesis, but should not become a straitjacket to conversing about specific educational dynamics that emerge through the conversation with students, teachers, and parents, among others. Likewise, the fact that the conversations with social actors result in raising several topics pertaining to their feelings and experiences in education at the same time, does not provide these conversations with explanatory power themselves (that would entail endorsing a flat ontology that reduces structure to agency). What is important is how all these accounts (and various topics) talk about patterns in their experience that, all together, help to theorise about the operation of causal mechanisms at work.

Chapter Three: mediating the powers and contradictions of educational structures: analytical dualism and researching failing schools in Northern Colombia

3.1. Introduction

The scope of this Chapter to study expressions of the agency (i.e. perception) of educational actors from Northern Colombia. Its findings emerge from qualitative data retrieved in three *failing* schools (in relation to their performance in standardised national exams) and elaborate upon the perceptions and expectations that three main school actors (senior students, secondary teachers and parents) place on education. Thus, the emphasis of the study is not on the determinants of high-test scores, but rather on the way members of schools' communities mediate situations of poor performance.

One major contribution of this Chapter consists in deploying an analytic framework to use elements from analytical dualism in the analysis of qualitative data. Previous attempts to analyse data using CR (see Crinson (2007) and Fletcher (2017)) are promising yet problematic, in the sense that they fail to acknowledge the dialectical relationship between parts and wholes, as understood in analytical dualism. The implication of proposals suggested by these attempts, to be further discussed in the text, is that they entail a constructivist bias that privileges the subjective reasoning of the researcher over the study of the real powers of pre-existent social structures. Empirical realist research is hence still guilty of reproducing *critique for the sake of critique*, 'missing the significance of continuing with and contributing to the urgent need to advance a material agenda for emancipatory development' (Arsel & Dasgupta, 2015: 646). The counterproposal to this argument elaborates upon more canonical views of dialectical critical realism (Roberts, 2014) by situating the reading of the experiences of social agents within a set of hypotheses retrieved from previous research about the properties of social structures in action.

These ontological reflections inform the analysis of cases of communities that personalise many of the current educational challenges in the country (i.e. poor school performance, ill-equipped schools, households experiencing poverty). Methodologically speaking, the analysis profits from the advantages of a case study strategy, and a purposive sampling (Emmel, 2013, p. 111), combined with ethnographic research methods (i.e. participants' observation), to study complex processes of human mediation (Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014). Digging into the detailed perception of agents requires time for (non-native) researchers to build trust with local communities (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Likewise, pulling out the *levers* of agency involves combining methods to manage possible tensions that might emerge between researchers and inhabitants of the research site (Ram, Karlsson, et al., 2014).

3.2. Situating the cases

The three schools of this research belong to the southern region of the Department of Atlántico, in Northern Colombia. These territories are part of the Caribbean region, one of the most

economically disadvantaged regions in the country (Parada, 2013), and culturally distant from Bogotá. In the account of two prominent historians, '[the] Caribbean zone developed quite [distinct] characteristics from those of the more isolated interior. Its population is identified with the life and culture of the Caribbean, in contrast with the majority of the population in the more insulated Andean interior' (Palacios & Safford, 2002, p. 3). According to sociological work, the identity of the coastal inhabitants (*El costeño*) emanates feelings of frustration and cultural detachment from national economic and political dynamics (Lastra, 2008). The *costeño*, as portrayed by Correa de Andreís, expresses such attitudes in their daily life by embracing 'slackness [as a] survival tactic, a mechanism of self-defence' (2016: 10. Translated quotation. *Emphasis added*).

School failure is not a novel phenomenon in the region. The Observatory of the Colombian Caribbean Education (OCCE) showed that by 2012 only 11.8% of the schools in the whole Caribbean region were rated as good, very good or excellent (the figure was 21.9% for the Department of Atlántico). The national average was 31.6% (Said-Hung, Valencia, Turbay, & Justo, 2014). Administrative data from the Institution for the Evaluation of Education (ICFES) shows that in the period 2001-2013, senior students at the national level performed 67% better in standardised tests than their peers in the south of Atlántico (the site of the study) (See Figure 10 in Chapter 3). Furthermore, Ramírez & Téllez's (2007) time series analysis (with data that dates from the first decades of the XXth century) reveals how the Department of Atlántico has a historical lag in various types of secondary education indicators.

Secondary data from multiple resources reveals the many forms of material precarity surrounding the operation of the schooling system in the region. For instance, the gross national product per capita in the Caribbean corresponds to 42% of that in Bogotá, and poverty indicators show that the inhabitants from the former are, on average, 39.8 percentage points poorer and 13.6 percentage points less literate than Bogotanos (Sánchez & Otero, 2015). The Longitudinal Survey from Los Andes University (ELCA) reveals that the percentage of individuals above the age of 25 years without any educational diploma is twice as high in the coastal municipalities than in the rest of the country. Likewise, data from ICFES shows that while less than 3% of the parents of children attending the schools in the research sites has a university degree, that figure rises to 8% at the country level (See Appendix 4). More detailed indicators (see Table 3) show that the schools in the research sites receive less investment *for educational quality*⁵⁵ than the rest of the country and that students in the area experience more situations of overcrowding in the classroom than their average peer.

⁵⁵ Law 715 of 2001 sets a budget category for educational quality which is passed on directly to sub-national governments. These resources may not be used to cover administrative or personnel expenses.

Table 3. Secondary education indicators per regions and sub-regions

Indicator	Level	2008	2010	2012
Investment in education quality per pupil (million Colombian pesos of 2013)	National	0,68	0,71	0,78
	Atlántico	0,34	0,40	0,46
	South of Atlántico	0,36	0,46	0,41
Ratio students per teacher	National	24,67	26,32	21,88
	Atlántico	29,91	27,59	21,86
	South of Atlántico	28,25	27,40	20,18
Classroom space per student (m2)	National	1,88	1,93	2,18
	Atlántico	0,74	1,02	0,64
	South of Atlántico	0,69	0,93	0,17

Source: Author's calculation with data from the Department of National Planning, DNP.
Averages exclude outliers as identified through a Grubb's test, using STATA.

Table 4 presents disaggregate income data (by regions of the country) from the households of students at both the National and Departmental level, and from the two municipalities in this study. This comparative exercise unveils the level of material poverty experienced by senior pupils (from grade eleven) in the sub-regions of interest. While more than 95% of students that attend the schools in the sample live in households at income levels 1 and 2 (7 represents the highest level in the data set), that number is only 85% and 74% at the national and the Department of Atlántico levels, respectively. Moreover, secondary data from the Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education, ICFES, further shows how the situation in the two municipalities from which part of the information of this study was collected (see next section) coincides with lower levels of professionalisation among parents (See Appendix 3).

Table 4. Income level from senior students' households compared (%)

Income level	National	Atlántico	Mun 1	Mun 2
1	35,38	27,12	58,97	79,58
2	49,29	47,23	38,46	15,71
3	1,63	12,83	2,56	4,19
4	7,79	6,66	0,00	0,00
5	2,65	2,61	0,00	0,52
6	1,47	1,58	0,00	0,00
7	1,79	1,98	0,00	0,00

Source: Author's calculation with data from ICFES. The data is only available for senior students as they fill in a survey when they take National Standardised Exams in the last year of their secondary education. The measurement of income level represents the number of minimum wage equivalents received by each household monthly.

Most of the previous indicators unveil trends related to material resources (or the lack of them) that help understand many of the difficulties faced by educational actors in the region. However, '[p]ublic opinion, values and sentiments could also be seen as necessary components of the ideational environment in which policymakers intervene' (Verger et al., 2016: 25). The role of perception is one focus of this Chapter, and hence it will be further discussed in the results section of this document. For the time being, however, secondary data sources supply some context data about beliefs exhibited by the inhabitants of the regions under scrutiny vis-à-vis the role of education in society. Such is the case with the World Values Survey (WVS), whose data for the period 2010-2014 shows that 80% of the respondents in the Colombian Caribbean expressed the most negative view of whether they will be able to provide a good education to their children. That figure is 75% for Colombia as a whole and 56% for the Latin American region⁵⁶.

The municipalities in the current study experienced massive flooding in 2010 that had an important impact on the livelihoods of 180 thousand of the inhabitants in the south of the Department of Atlántico. The magnitude of the phenomenon was such that it is hard to deny possible short terms effects in school activity, given that many of the institutions in the region became shelters attending to the victims of the natural disaster. However, the tragedy affected 96% of the municipalities of Colombia, and around 7% of its population (Sánchez, 2014). The fact that the phenomenon was a national one, and that according to the results of National Standardised Exams (See Figure 7 in Chapter Two), it did not appear to have such a great effect on the historical pattern of poor performance in the region, one can still learn about the general operation of educational structures in the country from studying the schools in the research area..

3.3. It's good to talk: pulling out the levers of agency

The title of this section combines two ideas that inform this dissertation's take on methods. Firstly, it recovers Johnson's experience in carrying out focus group research, according to which 'people are quite capable of viewing their own experience in a wider optic than that of the individualising ideologies of the day' (1996: 535). Johnson's critique addresses the positivist take on qualitative research, as it casts participants as passive objects of research to (simply) validate pre-existent theories. The second part of the title elaborates upon Ram et al.'s (2014) claim that '[t]he promotion of a critical conscientiousness among participants can reveal social constructions, structural conditions that constraint, and mechanisms that have the potential to operate in a more progressive manner' (219). This section of the document elaborates upon these methodological considerations by opening a discussion of more *technical* aspects (i.e. data codification techniques) concerning a data analysis framework operating on the ontological logics of analytical dualism (See Chapter Two).

⁵⁶ Comparative figures are available online at <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>

3.3.1. Different actors; different methods

One implication of analytical dualism emanates from Maxwell's description of data, not as a simple source for interpretation, but as 'evidence for (...) real phenomena and process[es]' (2012: 103). In that regard, data collection cannot be solely method-driven (i.e. data that best fits one method) but should rather seek to relate to the reality under study. For instance, meeting with busy teachers and disengaged parents implied opening spaces to dialogue with them during holidays or weekends. The researcher also tried to gather students outside school hours, but the initial response level was close to zero. One option for the researcher was to work with children during class time, but such a decision confronted the researcher with an ethical dilemma by making students miss part of their daily classes. One alternative, which was previously discussed and agreed with school coordinators, was to conduct part of the activities with children during art class sessions by generating a methodology that involved engaging in a type of activity that was relevant for that specific class.

As a result of many of these decisions (and context dynamics), not all methods met the requirement of the ideal types of settings (i.e. a focus group needs to have a small number of participants (Johnson, 1996)). That, however, does not invalidate the type of evidence retrieved in the group conversations with senior students, teachers and parents. Two arguments support this last claim. The first is that the methods used for each type of workshop (see Table 5) sought to combine elements to encourage the reflexivity of participants and the means to allow everyone to participate in the discussions. These included, for instance, drawing and voting activities, all of which allowed individuals to have time to reflect on their individual experiences before engaging in more active conversations. Likewise, the researcher made efforts to reduce the pressure of power relations that might emerge when talking with children. With this last group, children were invited to help lead the group conversations and to ask questions of their peers about the topics under discussion.

Analytical dualism also entails reflecting upon the way researchers dialogue with interviewees. Given that the experiences and perceptions of local actors emerge in pre-existent contexts (i.e. an ongoing education policy), one of the researcher's goals was to understand the way in which agents mediate the properties of those social and cultural structures acting upon them. The problem, however, is that actors are not always aware of many of the factors and elements that contribute to moulding their behaviour (Archer, 2013). In this context, Pawson (1996) and Smith & Elger (2014) contend that dialoguing with people in the field demands a combination of structured and non-structured interviewing logics. While using only the former implies addressing interviewees as passive agents that validate pre-existent theories, using only the latter implies reducing the properties of social structures to the accounts that local actors make of them. One key aspect, is, hence, 'the creation of a situation in which the theoretical postulates/conceptual structures under investigation are open for inspection in a way that allows the respondent to make an informed and critical account of them' (Pawson: 313). Table 5 has a column that refers to indicative questions posed by the researcher during the activities, all of which sought to balance the aim to both validate pre-existent knowledge and gather (unexpected) data on the way local actors reflect on their situated reality.

Table 5. List of interviewees, methods and indicative questions

Activity	Groups	Participants per group (average) or sample size	Methodology	Indicative research questions
Focus group with senior students	6	10 (Total number of participants: 60)	Students described drawings they made about "one typical day at school". One student was chosen to lead the discussion in each group	1. What did you draw? 2. Why does that situation happen? 3. How does that situation make you feel? 4. What can students do to change that situation? (if anything)
Workshop 1 with secondary teachers	4	15 (Total number of participants: 58)	Teachers described drawings they made about their impressions when they first arrived at the school (Situation A), and their impressions of the school today (Situation B)	1. What did you draw? 2. Why are situations A and B different? What changed and why?
Workshop 2 with secondary teachers	3	30 (Total number of participants: 89)	Teachers distributed a number of resources (represented by 10 tokens) for solving problems at schools. The set of options arose from question 3 in the survey (below)	What categories were the most and least voted for? Why?
Workshop with parents	3	42 (Total number of participants: 127)	Parents distributed a number of resources (represented by 10 tokens) for solving problems at schools. The set of options came out from question 3 in the survey (below)	What categories were the most and least voted for? Why?
Random survey with citizens in the street of the two municipalities		Total survey responses 219	Random sampling. Open questions (plus some basic demographic data).	1. What is a good education? 2. What is your opinion about the schools in this municipality? 3. What are currently the three most important problems with schools in this municipality? 4. What is a good teacher? 5. Are today's teachers different from teachers when you were a child? Why?

3.3.2. Seeking a theoretical validity of the results

The use of evidence in this article seeks a theoretical validity of the results. In Maxwell's account, 'the reason for calling [it] (...) theoretical, is that it goes beyond concrete description and interpretation (...) and explicitly addresses the theoretical constructions that the researcher brings to, or develops during, the study' (2012: 140). Crinson's (2007) and Fletcher's (2017) methodological reflections provide some explicit guidelines for data coding within such *inferential* logics. Their strategy consists in combining a first round of deductive - yet flexible - classification of the data, using categories taken from previous (relevant) theories (i.e. from the literature on school effectiveness research), with a subsequent refinement of those categories with conceptual abstractions that relate to critical realism.

The empirical contributions mentioned above are valuable yet problematic. Roberts' (2014) critique of non-dialectical forms of critical realist research is of extreme relevance here.

Dialectics, in this case, calls for a type of analysis that conceives the dialectical relationship between social totalities (i.e. a global or national education policy) and its parts (i.e. a situated case of poor school performance). That is important to clarify because, while the concept of emergence in critical realism states that the properties of both the totality and its parts are not reducible to each other, they are still mutually intertwined (Willmott R. , 1999a) - hence their relationship is dialectical. From this perspective, one problem with Fletcher's (2017) and Crinson's (2007) proposal is that their analytical framework tends to exist in a context vacuum, failing, hence, to embed the experiences of social actors in both the commonalities and contradictions of pre-existent social structures. From the following excerpt, one can grasp how non-dialectical frameworks might fall, therefore, into the realms of thick constructivism.

... the common claim made by critical realists that the social world is “open” implies that a number of researchers can follow a realist methodology but still nevertheless produce competing causal accounts of the same social phenomenon (...) But what can be suggested (...) is that dialectical explanation seeks to combine an analysis of concrete *open systems* with abstract *closed systems* (totalities, in Bhaskar's later language) by arguing that even contingent concrete forms refract a higher level contradictory essence in its own unique manner (...). This is to treat the research context as a self-contained (external) totality that nevertheless refracts the wider totality of which it is a part (Roberts, 2014: 12-14. *Original emphases*).

The point here is not to fall into epistemic positions defending crude objectivism (i.e. the superiority of quantitative *unbiased* research), but to acknowledge the dialectical connection between historical processes and concrete events. That is to say, the accounts of social actors refer to particular social structures with real, or objective (Edwards G. , 2014), causal powers. Empirical research consists, hence, in studying how ‘abstract structures undergo change [or exert causal efficacy] through concrete spacetime-relations’ (Roberts, 2014: 6). Within such dialectical logics, the accounts of social structures can still allow for differentiated descriptions - in the end, researchers are reflexive subjects - yet these descriptions will refer to (at least) similar understandings of the research context. By distancing itself from thick constructivism (or relativism), dialectical critical realism opens up the scope for conversations and knowledge accumulation about the past and the possible directions towards which social structures evolve (Roberts, 2014).

One concrete implication of this discussion is the need to depart from general hypotheses about the types of social structures (and their properties) acting upon social agents. Here is important to avoid elaborating upon discrete elements (i.e. isolated characteristics), but rather advance to alluding to ‘geo-historically specific dialectical [commonalities or] contradictions (...) that bring into being a social form’ (Bhaskar, 1993, quoted in Roberts, 2014: 10)⁵⁷. The notion

⁵⁷ Such an implication derives from the complex nature of social phenomena, as portrayed by the ontology of critical realism. According to Archer (1995), the conditioning powers of both material and cultural structures act upon individuals by generating situational logics (i.e. commonalities and contradictions between those structures) that privilege certain behavioural traits.

of middle-range theories and middle-range theorisation already referred to in the Introduction to this document, is crucial to supporting this type of reasoning. It is important to clarify, once again, that the notion of a middle-range hypothesis (or hunch) employed here distances itself from the flat process of theory-making and theory testing that is typical in many of the research paradigms which realism explicitly criticises:

... a process of borrowing, consolidating and then passing on explanatory structures exemplifies the basic process of middle-range thinking. Researchers step away from the description of regularities to their explanation. The conceptual apparatus used in the explanation is then itself abstracted and enlarged (...) [That is an] starting point of realist empirical research, namely that it should be conducted around hypotheses that dwell upon how structure and agency combine to constitute the orderly observations we are able to make of social life. Two things are to be noted about this initial platform. Firstly, that it is in direct contrast to certain conventional forms of 'flat hypotheses-making'—about how the change in one variable may be explained by the change in another (as in much quantitative research), or about the search for plausible narratives on how one meaningful act leads to another (as in much qualitative research). Secondly, that it is not yet in a form helpful to empirical research. The notion of stratified society with causal powers lurking, waiting to emerge from every individual and institution, presents the researcher with a seemingly unlimited canvas in which everything potentially relates to everything else. So what is needed is a new way of parcelling up hypotheses that allows for this vast range of liabilities and capacities but does so in a way that presents a focused and finite research task (Pawson, 2000, pp. 288, 295).

It is important to insist on the fact that these hypotheses do not portray simply theory testing (as in closed systems,) but act as the first window to inform an abductive exercise (See Figure 2 in Chapter Two) in empirical events to the potential social mechanism at work⁵⁸. Following Roberts's (2014) discussion on dialectics, these are hypothetical ideas about the totalities (i.e. the real powers of education policy and its various elements). This process of theory building presupposes the existence of preliminary knowledge about the topic of study as a legitimate source of fallible causal accounts that need verification and, in a given case, a theoretical and conceptual refinement (or specification in a concrete context) for ~~it~~ this previous knowledge to help unravelling structure and agency across human settings. Hence, middle-range hypotheses emerge from different possible sources, including studies that refer to similar questions to those

⁵⁸ 'Put negatively, my argument here is that in most survey and evaluation research, theory is 'flattened' so that it is expressible only in $X \rightarrow Y$ propositions or judgements about alternative $X_1, \rightarrow Y, X_2 \rightarrow Y$ propositions. Theory is developed only to the level that Merton deemed as insufficient: 'isolated proposition(s) summarising uniformities of relationship between two or more variables' (1968, p. 41). In realist language, one can say that the issue at hand here stems from the routine fact that empirical research prioritises the investigation of causal outcomes at the expense of adequate understanding of mechanisms and contexts' (Pawson, 2000, p. 301).

that this study seeks to answer (and to the specific case under inquiry). Following Bhaskar's epistemological consideration (quoted in the last paragraph), it is crucial that these opening hunches talk about relational dynamics (in line with the relational notion of social emergence in CR) and not about atomistic entities. In Pawson's (2013) language (as he quotes Robert Merton's work in methodology), the latter entails setting up hunches that 'are sufficiently abstract to deal with different spheres of social behaviour and social structure, so that they transcend sheer description' (p. 8).

The following hunches (henceforth, H1, H2 and H3) emerge from previous research about the way in which national (and international) education reforms operate and documents potential contradictions identified by scholars connected to the operation of neoliberal education policies, such as those in Colombia (Vanegas, 2003). The hunches emerge, therefore, from the preliminary literature review upon which the objectives of this research were settled. With only one exception, none of this preliminary research refers to the experience of educational actors in the specific setting of the research (simply because there is not much empirical research published about these specific contexts). However, these academic outputs do talk about a totality (the operation of ongoing national education policy), opening up the opportunity to start studying the specific causal properties of educational structures acting upon students, parents and teachers in the schools in Northern Colombia:

H1: Education reforms of the early 2000s increased the tasks of educators (Cifuentes, 2014). The contemporary educator has become 'a disinterested and dispassionate teacher who is adept at gathering data as proof of continued success as self-regulating lifelong learners and of securing students' quantifiable achievements' (Mooney et al., 2016: 7). Such new teachers fail to attend to the needs (i.e. emotional) of students (Willmott, 1999b).

H2: Schools have not evolved at the same pace as the many cultural features shaping contemporary relationships between teachers, students and parents. For instance, disciplinary disputes occur hand in hand with the sinking of traditional values and the universalisation of human rights promoted by the mass media that has increased the pluralisation of different beliefs and values (Palacios; 2013). Posada (2009) describes a similar panorama for the case of schools in the Caribbean region.

H3: Despite the spirit of decentralisation encoded in educational reforms - which includes the promotion of school autonomy - school administrators lack effective means to solve many of the immediate needs of teachers and students. As school directors are held responsible for assuring the quality of education in schools (Rodríguez, 2015), they have become simple intermediaries between the Ministry of Education and teachers (Cajiao, 2014).

With these statements in mind, the subsequent analysis in this dissertation combined many of the steps announced by Fletcher (2017) and Crinson (2007) to classify excerpts from transcripts of conversations held with local actors. The initial code frame included a set of nodes (using Nvivo's language) to capture information relevant to the role of students, parents and teachers in education, the (lack of proper) infrastructure in schools, problems with motivation and discipline exhibited by children, and explicit references to the quality of education. The process of refinement and reclassification of these categories also introduced a set of abstract themes (or nodes) to capture references to material (i.e. laws, institutions, resources) and ideational (i.e. beliefs, customs) forces that potentially shape the interviewees' experiences. These categories, following Fletcher (2017), refer more explicitly to the structure and agency debate implied in analytical dualism, and hence help to theorise about the causal properties of educational structures.

3.4. Conversing with educational actors in northern Colombia

The previous section elaborated a methodological argument to focus the analysis on H1, H2 and H3. Nonetheless, the researchers did go through all the transcripts, following the general coding strategy discussed above. Such an analytical approach pursues the goals of dialectics, by allowing researchers to reflect on the way agents mediate pre-existent structures, without closing the door to the emergence of new categories informing the reflection on social structures at work.

H1 refers to conflicts that emerge in teacher-student relations given the bureaucratisation of the teaching profession. Here one can include many elements of ongoing legislation, such as the new conditions for the promotion of teachers (i.e. reporting activities for their end of year evaluations), but also new (implicit) demands for them to improve their skills (i.e. the funding of postgraduate studies and other types of training). This view clashes with official policy narratives defending the importance of increasing the accountability of teachers to foster the quality of education (Barrera-Osorio, Maldonado, & Rodriguez, 2014). Accounts from actors in the field unveil, however, multiple nuances regarding the assumption of such a causal linkage between qualified teaching and actual learning. Educators would argue, for example, that it is not clear how the government expects schools, as a community, to profit from newly acquired individual skills, when institutions lack the spaces (both physical and in their academic calendar) to institutionalise updates and innovations brought by teachers' education initiatives. The following excerpts from interviews with secondary school teachers highlight many of the elements mentioned above:

Teacher (T): *I believe that it is a little demotivating that the government, now with the Secretary of Education, has removed the morning space we had here with teachers. (...) after a working day with students (...) we still need to stay [at school] to continue training ourselves and (...) we are all tired (...) I remember that a long time ago (...), [schools allowed] space once a month to train teachers, training that the government does not allow today. This space, I believe, needs to be regained (...) because there are many teachers that know new things, who*

have received training and can replicate it (...) this [is a] space that the government has taken away from us because they believe that one day without working with the students is a lost day.

T: *... one is motivated by training X and the place where one is receives it, but when one comes back to the school and asks for spaces for socialisation, to share that experience with colleagues, there is no time (...) there is no time and no possibility, no space, 'we have lost class time' [they tell us], so they set obstacles, and hence my question is why do they send us?*

Several forces seem to be (potentially) at work in this specific setting. References to lacking spaces to share experiences and the fear of losing effective hours unveil, for example, contradictions immanent in education policy designs. On the one hand, the logic of the Ministry of Education foresees success in combining skilled teachers with more class time per pupil to encourage efficiency in learning. On the other hand, however, and due to the same logic of efficiency, that same logic ends up narrowing the spaces through which external training can contribute to fostering pedagogical processes within schools. This is also the case when the government asks teachers to gather data to prove their performance at work, in the sense that the intention to make teachers accountable for their (individual) productivity disarticulates collective efforts and initiatives and blurs wider pedagogical initiatives. In the words of another educator:

T: *There are some priorities that we supposedly have, with the result that another activity gets in the way. So, we finish one activity and then others arrive, and we start them without finishing [others] and then others [arrive], and we keep accumulating and accumulating.*

In the case of students, many of them express feelings of frustration towards their relationships with teachers, particularly when it comes to addressing their personal affairs as teenagers. Problems that affect households in the region (as also reported by different informants in the field) include early pregnancy in female students and the absence of parents who travel to other regions (and to countries such as Venezuela) to work, meaning that many children lack role models in their families. These dynamics are to be expected in regions in the country with reported problems of material poverty (see the last section). It is therefore one thing to talk about the learning experiences of boys and girls, in which children convey different stories of success and failure (i.e. innovative methodologies vs non-innovative educators), and quite another to refer to their expectations to also receive emotional support at school. This second expectation is rarely met:

Student (S): *most of the teachers arrive in the classroom and see him [a student that seems to be sad] and continue lecturing as if they do not care (...) it is like if they said, 'you are not my child so why should I care'?*

Researcher (R): *but haven't you seen teachers that approach him to ask him 'what happened'?*

S: most of them [don't] (...) if one classmate is sad, it is rare that another classmate or the teacher approaches him.

The following excerpt confronts the experience of this last student with the opinion of one teacher regarding such situations. From the educator's point of view, seeing children as learning vessels or machines is a result of the mindset of many teachers incentivised by results and probably attenuated by contextual factors such as the rising number of students they need to deal with:

T: how many times are there children, forty children, in front of us, or thirty-five, or thirty-seven, who represent thirty-seven different families? (...) but do we really know them? We do not know them, sometimes we see them only as machines; knowledge and knowledge and knowledge, and that leads to many situations of a lack of respect.

Many of the elements mentioned above are also reflected in H2. However, this second hypothesis focuses less on issues pertaining to the internal logics of policy designs and deals more with the extent to which educational initiatives dialogue with other cultural aspects of society. Culture is reflected in the types of preferences and expectations held by different members of the school's community towards education and their motivations to participate (or not) in educational affairs. Parents and school teachers, for example, refer to the way in which students have changed to become less disciplined and less respectful. It is quite common to hear claims coming from both groups, arguing that the lack of discipline is a phenomenon that schools did not face before, at least not to the magnitude faced by schools today. Both blame contemporary legislation protecting the rights of children, in the sense that they do not see this legislation as a mechanism to protect children but rather as a device for children to justify anarchic behaviours. In the words of two parents:

Parent (P) 1: I think that laws of the State that protect adolescences [imply that] we cannot hit them [and] in schools' teachers cannot tell them off.

P2: it is possible that today we are too paternalistic (...) if the parent hits his son, the neighbour will denounce him to the welfare office. So, they say that he is going to be traumatised (...) my parents punished me physically quite frequently when I was a child, and I was not traumatised, they taught me to respect

Teachers have similar claims:

T: Among all the demands of the government it has also been flexible in talking about (...) children's rights, and so today parents withdraw from rebuking [their kids] because the child threatens that they will sue them (...). Equally one demands [good behaviour] from them but one has to provide them with reasons so they won't feel [bad] and that contributes, perhaps, to

the fact that today one cannot find the respect that existed before when the child knew that he had to respond to the teacher and that the teacher had support from his parents

In this last excerpt, the interviewee also refers to the way in which students' relationships with parents and teachers are being reshaped. In his account, teachers in the past had the support of the parents. And indeed, as policy documents also recognise today, many parents are hardly involved in the education of their children. Structural factors in this region, such as poverty and the physical absence of working parents, contribute to explaining why not many parents attend meetings or respond to calls from the school to discuss children's problems. One teacher expressed that clearly when she mentioned that families and children have no greater expectations than working in informal sectors (i.e. selling *empanadas*⁵⁹), and hence their lack of interest in school affair. Little is said, however, about the way in which policies also contribute to undermining the intrinsic motivations of the households towards education, as they now seek new benefits from schools:

P: another influential factor is that (...) many parents come with their children because the government is giving out subsidies and students already know about [it] (...) and they have the same mindset as their parents to go to schools to collect their subsidy

R: Like Familias in Accion⁶⁰?

P: Like Familias en Accion and others, so what happens is that they do not come with an interest to study, but for their parents to claim their subsidy

In the case of children, while they also acknowledge their parents' exhibit a lack of interest in their studies - one student even mentioned that she makes fun of her teachers with her parents at home - their concerns about values relate more to their lack of motivation to study. Put simply, they see school education as boring, and only a few classes, particularly those in which they have opportunities to reflect about life (such as in philosophy or psychology classes), make sense to them. One problem, however, citing one young boy, is that these types of classes represent only a marginal slot in their academic calendar:

S: the areas to which they give less importance are those that we need the most because the student does not learn to know himself and to then open to other people. Isn't it true?

(...)

R: why do they devote more time to these subjects than to the others [you mention]

⁵⁹ Empanada is a kind of fried fast food commonly sold in many streets of Colombian cities.

⁶⁰ (Más) Familias en Acción is the biggest conditional cash transfer programme in the country.

S: *Because they consider them more important, like calculus, mathematics, statistics*

R: *Is that important to you?*

S: *Well, yes, because those are the basis for what one is going to study at university, but I also consider other ones important [like ethics] ... because these are the ones that will help you in your spiritual and personal life*

The issue of discipline and respect also unveils concerns reflected in H3. All three social actors agree in highlighting administrative problems in schools as reflected in the lack of leadership by school administrators in sanctioning negative behaviour, or in promoting institutional investments that could contribute to improving learning environments and reduce the scope for conflict. Interestingly, rather than demanding more freedom or autonomy for them as individuals, school actors miss authority and order (this idea also relates to H2). The following excerpts illustrate this issue. Students, for example, see in the *lack* of proper administration in the school as a motivation to perpetuate their bad behaviour:

R: *What needs to be done for the situation to change, so that [students] pay attention in class?*

S: *... a more severe director, more than all the teachers. A teacher that is [also severe] in the classroom because there is no use in a silly teacher that no-one respects*

Teachers, on the other hand, believe that the lack of authority obfuscates cooperation and coordination among teachers and coordinators. That happens, despite the good intentions of school directors:

T: *Today we can say that the (...) current director is a person that has worked a lot for the institution in the necessary areas (...). But I would like to see him exercise more authority to see whether that authority would [motivate] many colleagues who are not very committed to the institution [to] become more committed.*

Likewise, many educators acknowledge that situations such as the lack of proper infrastructure to deal with issues extreme weather conditions are a result of a lack of initiative by school directives to find resources:

T1: *We are in a warm room because energy is very limited
(...)*

T2: *I think that there is a lack of management (...) lack of willingness and management (...) of projects.
(...)*

R: management? Management from the school?

T2: from the school (...) [the request of] projects to the Governorship (...) to the Ministry, with NGOs, for them to see that we have needs and that they need to provide [solutions] but if we do not say anything ...

R: and that management, probably why is it missing, why isn't it better?

T2: leadership, lack of leadership by our managers, it is that simple

Finally, parents also express concerns towards the lack of initiative by schools' administrators, but in their case, they complain about the flexibility exhibited to penalise unwanted behaviours. For example, many of the interviewees complain about the lack of participation by children's guardians in meetings, and demand initiatives by the director to sanction irresponsible families:

R: what types of things should the school be doing for parents to come [to meetings]

P1: they should send students back to their homes

(...)

P2: the school director needs to use strategies

P3: they should make a rule that states that if the parents of the student do not show up the [school] will not allow the student in, but here they don't do anything about it

3.5. Conclusion

The decentralisation of education policy is seen as a way of improving educational indicators in Colombia. Educational reform as expressed in Law 715 from 2002 was envisioned, by some scholars, as an attempt to generate new incentives for the emergence of a new educational system characterised by the professionalism of teachers, the autonomy and accountability of schools, and efficiency in the production of better results (i.e. test scores). This current research makes an empirical contribution to this debate by elucidating how schools mediated the structures of education policy, focusing on specific cases of school failure. This was possible using the proposal in this Chapter on how to use methods to analyse data through the lens of analytical dualism (to overcome the immanent problems of the extremes of positivism and thick constructivism informing educational studies). In that regard it is important to clarify that the innovation does not lie in how to operationalise specific methods. As discussed in Chapter Two, CR embraces different types of existent methods and techniques (and accepts their own logics to validate their findings). What makes the proposal innovative is the use of dialectics as a framework to help focus the analysis of data in a way that it refers to a specific element (or stage) in the whole methodology (or strategy) of the study (see Figure 10).

Findings from the current study provide, therefore, empirical evidence to start confirming and, very importantly, refining H1, H2 and H3. Such a task, however, certainly in relation to the whole research design (an ontological discussion) of the thesis, will require engaging in a dialectal reflection vis-à-vis the findings from the independent exploration of the properties of social structures (Archer, 2013). That is why determining whether these explanations make it entirely possible to understand the phenomena of school failure in these specific regions exceeds the scope of this Chapter. Likewise, the treatment of the empirical in CR as a first window into the exploration of causal powers indicates that the analysis in this Chapter is valuable as a way of grasping the existence of potential underlying mechanisms at work (the process of abduction in Figure 2). These clarifications are important to make it clear that the reader should avoid seeing the results as a list of topics mentioned by the various educational actors (to build a type of *market-list*), and start thinking in more general terms (or structural properties) to which they refer.

In relation to H1, accounts from local actors concur with the fact that teachers experience difficulties in meeting children's expectations. Such difficulties are not reflected in the teachers' capacity to convey information, but rather in their skills to get the children's attention and provide them with emotional support. However, the problem is not uni-directional. On the one hand, education policies seem to exert contradictory messages to schools to improve test scores (hence, the training of teachers) but at the same time close the important pedagogical spaces (given that they signify a loss of class time) where teachers can learn from each other's experiences in engaging students. On the other hand, context data shows that households in the regions under discussion experience poverty and the absence of parents, which probably negatively affects students' motivation (accounts from children and teachers support this last claim). Then again, the incentives that are given to teachers to focus on their personal affairs (like collecting evidence to prove their performance) distances them from addressing pressing issues faced by teenagers.

H2 refers to the way in which the school, as an organisation, fails in addressing the nurturing of values that social actors expect to be reinforced through education. The accounts by social actors in the field help to highlight possible paths through which the perceptions of sinking of moral values (which many see as the cause of the increase in disciplinary conflicts in schools) reveal institutions' inability to adapt to modern times. For example, the negative views about the protection of human rights, which teachers and parents see as driving the lack of discipline and disrespect, are evidence of the failure of result-driven forms of education in schools to adopt moral values into the working principles of the institutions. The views of these specific social actors, which do endorse the view that schools were better before because they managed to enforce discipline, refer to the cultural role (to help to discipline society) of educational institutions, at least in the region of the study. That is a cultural structure that requires further exploration.

Finally, H3 deals with one of the current debates around the country's decentralisation model. The debate about the autonomy of schools is not a conclusive one in the country. However, one can see that there is a low *de facto* level of independence in schools to take, for example, administrative decisions. All three consulted actors, from the three schools investigate, pointed

out that many of the problems in their institutions occur because the rector has a limited capacity to take decisions autonomously. Likewise, the thoughts shared by teachers reflect the importance for institutions of pursuing certain standards (i.e. success in standardised test scores) which relate to national goals. Such a controversy opens the question of the extent to which education policies do indeed pursue (or at least cohere with) forms of decentralised education.

Chapter Four: Analytical dualism and Classroom Observation in Context: reflections from failing schools in Northern Colombia⁶¹

4.1. Introduction

This Chapter introduces classroom observations to explore further the experiences and the interactions of educational actors. As such, the findings that emerge from its analysis contributes to the abductive exercise of the dissertation (outlined in Figure 2). As one recent report from the World Bank about Education in Latin America stated, '[t]he magic of education—the transformation of schooling inputs into learning outcomes—happens in the classroom' (Bruns & Luque, 2014). Observing lessons is hence relevant to the current inquiry on the persistence of poor school performance in Colombia as a way to study how national and local education policies shape day-to-day teaching and learning practices at educational institutions. Conversely, based on the logic of retroduction, studying these practices becomes a methodological device to study the potential properties of those structures.

The stance of this dissertation is not to conceptualise a classroom as simply a physical learning space (as the quote from the World Bank seems to suggest), but as 'a semi-permanent, often episodic, complex ensemble of causal mechanisms that enable and constrain learning' (Brown G. , 2009, p. 31). From the perspective of stratification and open systems, debates about teaching-learning practices should transcend the scope of pedagogy (i.e. the application of learning technologies) to study the interaction of internal (i.e. teacher and students attitudes) and external (i.e. directives from the Ministry of Education) forces shaping those dynamics⁶². O'Sullivan's (2006) reflection on this specific topic (the role of classroom observations in informing educational debates) is crucial to support this methodological perspective: According to this scholar:

... lesson observation can answer the *what* questions and illuminates the *how* questions, i.e. what is the current state of educational quality in schools and how can it be realistically improved with the available resources. It can also provide some insights into the *why* questions—why is the quality of education poor? (2006, 255. *Original emphases*).

One key element in O'Sullivan's (2006) quote is the notion of the context of the observation, as it 'enables a focus on what can be done with available resources and professional capacity at a particular time' (p. 255). To grasp the contextual knowledge, she argues, researchers need to make use of other types of data, 'most notably teacher interview data, to more fully understand the teaching and learning processes currently being used and the extent to which particular processes are likely to be implemented' (p. 255). In line with the notion of analytical dualism

⁶¹ A paper version of this chapter is in the stage of revise and resubmission to the *Brazilian Journal of Education*

⁶²Such a view opens up the scope to new contributions to the debate on the quality of primary and secondary education, in particular given the exhaustion of mainstream input-output frameworks to address global and local educational challenges (Tikly, 2011; Coffield, 2012; O'Leary, 2012).

endorsed in this document, giving the possibility to educators to help the researcher make interpretations about the reasons behind certain classroom dynamics becomes an opportunity to explore further the way in which these specific actors mediate the properties of educational structures acting upon the specific settings of this study.

With those former discussions in mind, the following observational exercise answers the need for innovation in methods in order to put realist ontology into practice via empirical research. The dialectical move discussed in the last Chapter is equally relevant here in indicating the importance of situating the analysis of human actions (the observations) and perceptions (in dialogues with teachers and classroom observers) within the scope of provisional hunches about the mechanisms acting upon those observed dynamics. In that sense, the analysis in this Chapter can (and will) profit from H1, H2 and H3 presented in section 3.3.2. However, it is important to reiterate the scarcity of published work on how to integrate the reading of the perception of the accounts of local actors with views about broader policy dynamics (that is the dialectics between parts and totalities discussed by Roberts (2014)). Therefore, this Chapter seeks to explore other types of methodological innovations in realist-informed research. That goal coheres, once again, with the exploratory spirit of this dissertation. The literature on classroom observation provides tools to inform such an endeavour. The following notion of ethogenics, as presented by Wragg (1999) in his *Introduction to Classroom Observation*, has an important methodological value to this discussion due to its explicit objective to study *underlying causes* of classroom dynamics. In his words:

A central feature of the ethogenic approach is the understanding of episodes in social life. ‘Episodes’ are sequences of interlocking acts by individuals. It is the task of ethogenics to elucidate the underlying structures of such episodes by investigating the meanings actors bring to the constituent acts (Bryman (1988) (...). Although ethogenics is another variant of the view that renounces quantitative methodology, its supporters endorse the notion of taking a scientific approach to classroom observation and the understanding of what happens there. It simply rejects positivists’ use of quantities to achieve scientific rigour, favouring an alternative form which seeks to elicit underlying structure by careful qualitative of sequences of events, rather than impose it by predetermined schedules and other instruments of observation (pp. 59-60).

The above quote makes it clear that Wragg’s (1999) use of ethogenics seeks ‘to *elicit* underlying structure[s] by [a] careful qualitative analysis of sequences of events’ (pp. 59-60). Methodologically speaking, such an assertion coincides smoothly with the stratified ontology of critical realism, as well as with O’Sullivan’s (2006) arguments suggesting a more promising way of using classroom observation research to inform education policy debates. With these elements in mind, this Chapter draws upon the presentation of a strategy to observe classroom events (or dynamics) in context (see below) to identify new elements that contribute further to the abductive exercise (see Figure 2) initiated in the last Chapter of this document. These results, it is important to insist, cannot be conclusive about the whole causal account behind the

emergence and persistence of poor school performance in the regions under study. The present Chapter focuses, rather, on the way students and teachers mediate education policy structures through classroom interactions.

The first part of the Chapter introduces some relevant aspects of the literature on classroom observation to justify the selection of an approach known as Classroom Observation in Context (CoC) to engage in the study of the underlying mechanism behind teacher and students interactions in the classroom setting. The operationalisation of such a strategy departs from acknowledging relevant contextual data to select the observation sample and to anticipate possible technical and political challenges (and provide some answers to them) faced by the researcher when making his way into classrooms. The last part of the Chapter presents the general results of the inquiry and provides a brief discussion on the way the information retrieved in this exercise contributes to the abductive process (see Figure 2) of this dissertation.

4.2. Methodology to observe classrooms in Northern Colombia

4.2.1. *What is Classroom Observation in Context?*

This Chapter aims to propose a methodology to unleash the potential of classroom observation to enable policymakers and researchers to identify valuable information on the real forces that shape classroom dynamics. O’Leary’s (2006; 2012; 2013; 2014a, 2014b) extensive work in contrasting, both ontologically and methodologically, different approaches to classroom observation is a valuable departing point for the current analysis. Apart from some possible nuances, O’Leary identifies two major trends in the specialised literature on the topic. The first one he associates with Gosling’s performance-driven models (PDMs) of peer observation of teaching, which vary from the straightforward application of structured templates to grade educators to the opening up of spaces for teachers to reflect and participate in their professional development. In their most refined version of PDMs, according to O’Leary’s exposition, ‘tutors observe each other as part of a formative process (...) [serving] the dual purpose of promoting the development of [the] observer and [the] observee’ (2012, p. 803). The distinctive feature of these models is their endorsement of the assumption of the existence of a direct and strong causal link between a teacher’s effectiveness and a student’s performance.

O’Leary’s reiterates, however, how this mainstream approach to class observation ‘does little, if anything, to lead to an overall improvement in the standards and quality of classroom teaching and learning’ (O’Leary, 2006, p. 192). An underlying assumption of PDMs is that ‘the observed teacher is an account waiting to be filled with deposits of wisdom from the observer, thus suggesting an imbalance of power and expertise in the observer–observee relationship and the degree of autonomy afforded the latter’ (O’Leary, 2012, p. 805). One problem with such restrictive approaches that place the summative outcome as the *raison d’être* of the observation, he writes, is that they conceptually disconnect the teacher’s agency from the context where teaching happens, hence presenting findings as teachers’ (individual) problems (O’Leary, 2013). In line with O’Sullivan’s (2006) critique outlined above, the fixation on what the teachers should

do, rather than on discussing the reasons why they cannot do otherwise, make PDMs ill-equipped to foster educational changes in schools.

Along these lines, O'Leary is more enthusiastic about the potential of Wragg's (1999) approach of Classroom Observation in Context (CoC) to 'illustrate how the focus of observation does not always have to be on the teacher's performance' (O'Leary, 2012, p. 805). This is the second trend he discusses in his overview of the existent literature on the topic. He argues that, 'Wragg's decision to categorise observation with reference to contexts rather than models also suggests that this is a more meaningful way of configuring it as it avoids the blurred boundaries between [PDMs] models' (O'Leary, 2012, p. 805). CoC is not a model, at least not in the ordering or deterministic sense of input-output approaches to classroom observation, but rather a way of categorising an observation 'into the contexts in which it occurred' (O'Leary, 2012, p. 803). One key aspect here lies in the studying of contexts not only in the classroom (i.e. the specific sets of relationships in one physical setting) but also beyond it. Wragg's emphasis on the logic of ethogenics (see the introduction of this Chapter) holds, therefore, important epistemic value for the current study.

Wragg's use of ethogenics seeks 'to *elicit* underlying structure[s] by [a] careful qualitative analysis of sequences of events' (1999, pp. 59, 60). In contrast to some versions of PDMs, he suggests, quantification is useful not to measure standards, but to help researchers to identify patterns that indicate the operation of potential underlying mechanisms affecting teacher-student dynamics in a classroom setting. Such an argument coheres with a realist epistemology that values the theorising on 'some contrast *x rather than y* (...) in conditions where we might have expected [y]' (Lawson, 2009, p. 408. *Original emphasis*), rather than seeking to predict differences in outcomes by appealing to theoretical prepositions. This type of methodological assertion also provides a rationale for combining quantitative and qualitative information - to describe potential patterns and to provide theoretical causal constructs, respectively - that should help the analyst to transcend the objective and subjective divide that typically, and artificially, undermines the importance of qualitative narratives in scientific research⁶³.

However, different types of questions might follow in relation to the stages of data analysis to produce valuable feedback information for those interested in the design of education policies. For instance, who decides what types of sequences of events observers should record and how to interpret them? Should the researcher decide on observational categories ex-ante or ex-post to help the classification of events? One starting point, as O'Leary suggests, is the need for 'educational leaders, inspectors, policymakers and practitioners alike (...) to break free from the assessment straitjacket that currently constrains the perception and implementation of observation' (O'Leary, 2014a, p. 220). The same author provides, however, more *specific* solutions

⁶³ The quantitative-qualitative divide in social research is common in methodological debates. Usually, quantification is seen as a practice that better represents the scientific way of doing research. However, from a realist perspective, '[q]uantitative data, expressed regarding magnitudes, is only meaningful when the relevant objects and processes are qualitatively invariant. Given the contextual nature of efficient causes (= reasons for actions)—and the ubiquity of qualitative change and variation—qualitative language and methods are needed to identify the relevant structures and causal powers, and to show how and why objects possess these causal powers' (Patomäki, 2003, p. 210).

to inform the operationalisation of concrete methodological steps that can be reproduced in different contexts. The idea of collaborative reflexivity is essential for that:

The emphasis here is on the word ‘co-construction’ as both have a collaborative and reciprocal role in constructing their personal knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning. This does not mean to say that the two will necessarily share the same interpretation of events observed but that the dialogic process of making sense of those events will be shared in a way that enhances personal meaning. Rather than one person controlling the acquisition and production of knowledge, a shared, dialogic approach necessitates the negotiation of meaning between the two parties, and it is during this negotiation of meaning that enhanced awareness and understanding often emerges (O’Leary, 2014b, pp. 118-119).

The placing of the importance of collaborative reflection, rather than the measurement of standards related to a teacher’s productivity, at the heart of the debate provides an argument in favour of non-structured observation schemes. Observational data, in this context, represents a type of ‘raw material upon which reflection is based and from which ideas are then generated’ (O’Leary, 2014b, p. 110). Therefore, what is valuable about the collection and classification in collaborative reflection is the possibility it motivates a dialogue between observers and observees. Some technical considerations regarding the data collection methods - see the discussions below - will help to improve the reliability of the observational material. However, it is key for researchers to seek the generation of ‘*a genuine situation of experience (...) upon which they could reflect since this was likely to lead to more meaningful reflection*’ (O’Leary, 2014b, p. 110. *Original Emphasis*).

The next section of this Chapter presents a classroom observation proposal to encourage the reflexivity of educational actors to delve further into the meaning and potential causes of classroom dynamics in schools. O’Sullivan’s (2006) caution expressed in her assertion on how classroom observations can only provide *some insights* into why - or causal - questions requires, however, some additional considerations. Once again, to succeed in the task of producing deep causal knowledge, as this document reiterates in its various sections, researchers will have to contrast observational and conversational material with other types of sociological data related to the educational systems they seek to examine (refer to Figure 3).

4.2.2. A multistage methodology for CoC

The following proposal for CoC builds explicitly on O’Sullivan’s (2006) questions and the basic outline of Wragg’s ethogenics. O’Leary’s (2014b) *classroom observation guide* provides further methodological insights into how to design such a strategy, without leaving aside valuable elements from the cumulative corpus of knowledge (i.e. technical insights) in that field. Details about the following steps also emerged from the experience of the researchers in observing classrooms in Northern Colombia (see next section). This clarification aims to convey the

message of the importance of building problem-driven, and not solely method-driven, strategies to study social phenomena (Scott, 2005).

Generally speaking, much of the current strategy elaborates on O'Leary's (2014b) discussion on the work of scholars influenced by John Dewey's critical thinking. Critical reflection, Dewey contends, helps in making the transition 'from being concerned with instructional techniques or (...) the 'how to' questions, and to concentrate on the more important 'what' and 'why' questions' (O'Leary, 2014b, p. 111). The collaborative reflection process takes a multistage process as presented in three major stages. These are, '1) the event itself i.e. an actual teaching episode; 2) recollection of the event i.e. an account of what happened without explanation or evaluation and 3) review and response to the event i.e. processing at a 'deeper level' (O'Leary, 2014b, p. 111). For the sake of clarity, the section now proceeds with the presentation of these general steps in the form of the three types of questions suggested by O'Sullivan (2006).

Stage one: The what question

One specific aim of this stage is to create a sequence of non-structured events to help researchers capture general classroom dynamics. Wragg's (1999) description of a *static* sampling answers quite well some basic requirements that meet this specific purpose. According to his textbook,

Some observers build up a series of snapshots of a lesson, a little bit like a time-lapse series of photographs. This means that they code what is happening at some regular interval, perhaps at the end of every minute. Suppose the observer were studying four individual children, two boys and two girls, then at the end of each period there would be a record of exactly where each child was and the nature of its activity at precisely that moment. The advantages of this kind of sampling are that it allows twenty or thirty such snapshots to be collected in quite a short time, preserves the sequence of events, and permits analysis that is not too time-consuming (Wragg, 1999, p. 34).

One methodological proposal for this phase is for observers to fill in, during the observed session, a spreadsheet with basic descriptors of what happens (i.e. the teacher explains a topic, students pay attention) at regular time intervals (i.e. one description every five minutes). In this phase it is also important to consider O'Leary's (2014b) comments on technical challenges to collecting non-structured data without disregarding basic reliability issues. One of them is the possibility of experiencing a *Hawthorne* effect, which means that teachers and students might fake their behaviour to make a good impression. A second relevant consideration is that observing one single classroom session might not be enough to identify *the most typical* classroom events. This may be for many internal (i.e. teachers deliver a rehearsed lesson) or external (i.e. a particular extracurricular activity shaping the content of that particular lesson) reasons. A CoC strategy can address such challenges by planning more than one observation session per classroom.

An additional element for consideration concerns the question of who should observe classrooms and record events. On the one hand, it is clear that observers might focus on describing different events happening at the same time (Wragg, 1999; O'Leary, 2014b). One

immediate solution for this concern is to assign more than one observer per session and invite them to arrive at some basic agreements on the types of events they find important to report about during one specific lesson. Such a step entails introducing a first stage of group reflexivity about the meaning of classroom dynamics. On the other hand, it is legitimate to consider the level of expertise expected from those collecting observational data in schools. Within the PDMs paradigm, this question is even more relevant, in the sense that observers should have certain characteristics (i.e. their level of expertise as teachers) that will make them stronger at evaluating the educators they observe. However, working with an ethogenic approach - which is less standardised - entails that “[e]ven classroom observers who have no intention of reading a single book about the topic would do well to recognise some of the precepts on which they are founded” (Wragg, 1999, p. 60). The empirical section of this document details the characteristics of the observers that were recruited to observe schools in Northern Colombia and the criteria, as opposed to the expertise of the observers, which guided the exploratory study in this specific setting.

Stage two: The how question

As discussed earlier in this document, both quantitative and qualitative methods are important to generate valuable data on classroom dynamics. Put plainly, ‘[w]hile the counting of events may offer some interesting insights, it falls far short of telling the whole story of classroom life’ (Wragg, 1999, p. 10). However, the first descriptive picture is valuable in itself as it represents a basis with which different educational actors can engage in a collaborative conversation about teaching and learning in secondary education (O’Leary, 2014b). Such a conversation, following Wragg (1999), can profit from a previous discussion between observers to prioritise the events that caught their attention the most and describe them further with other members of the observation team (i.e. with those observing other sessions). For instance,

[t]he observer looks for specific instances of classroom behaviour which are judged to be illustrative of some salient aspect of the teacher’s style or strategies: an element of class management, for example, perhaps a rule being established, followed, or being broken, something that reflects interpersonal relationships or some other indicative event. (...) Critical events need not be spectacular. They are simply things that happen that seem to the observer to be of more interest than other events occurring at the same time, and therefore worth documenting in greater detail, usually because they tell a small but significant part of a larger story (Wragg, 1999, p. 67).

Team meetings can hence be useful in helping a first cross-check of the data, and the perceptions about it, among researchers (Wragg, 1999), encouraging processes of group reflexivity about the meaning and the possible causes of observed classroom events. This phase helps to answer the what question, in the sense that it provides more details about the way events - as registered in phase one - take place. For example, while descriptively one can categorise one event as a case of ‘bad discipline’, a wider description can illuminate the existence of forms of discipline (i.e. not

paying attention, disrespecting the educator) that better represent the teacher-student relationship in a specific setting. If meetings are carried out in between observation sessions - given the importance, once again, of observing one classroom more than once - such reflections can also inform observers about particular elements that are potentially interesting in the next round of observations.

Stage three: Towards the why question

As in the previous stages, stage three of the strategy profits from Wragg's arguments and experience in applying different types of observation techniques in field research. In this last step, the researcher looks for further indications about the possible drivers that shape current classroom dynamics (as gathered during stages one and two of the process). These are only indications, given the epistemological arguments raised before on the need to complement descriptions and perceptions with other types of sociological and historical data. Along these lines, one straightforward methodological assertion indicates that qualitative analysis in this type of research,

requires the classroom observer to understand and explain how teachers act, usually by first observing and then interviewing. Teaching is such a rapidly moving set of activities, that the way in which teachers, and for that matter pupils, see and interpret what happens, is often neglected. Observations and interviews allow the taken-for-granted to be explored in greater detail (Wragg, 1999, p. 55)

Nonetheless, according to O'Learly (2006, p. 193) '[i]n reality, little opportunity is given to teachers to (...) participate in the observation process [actively]'. This means, therefore, valuable contextual information that is useful in the whole reflective process is missing. For this task, Wragg (1999) suggests that researchers holdingsuch interviews (or conversations) avoid using judgemental language in order to prevent misunderstandings with teachers and invite them to participate in a dialogue. It is advisable, hence, to '[use] neutral language like 'Can you tell me about...?', rather than loaded or leading questions, such as Why didn't you...?' (Wragg, 1999, p. 68). As was discussed in the empirical section of this paper, these considerations are relevant in contexts where there are important levels of mistrust between educators and, for example, educational authorities.

4.2.3. *Defining the sample*

Observing in context entails having at least some background contextual knowledge about the classroom setting in which the observations take place. Context data provides elements which provide researchers with meaning about observational data and conversations with educational agents. That being said, studying schools in Colombia entails entering a contested terrain. For example, there is a dominant narrative among the unions on the need to become 'more protective in light of an increasingly market-oriented environment [in education]' (Gindin & Finger, 2013, p. 25; Rodríguez A. , 2015). Contrary to the optimism expressed by scholars and

policymakers around the efficiency in the sector sponsored by Law 715 from 2001 (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2014), educators in schools – most of which are members of Atlántico’s association of educators (ADEA) - feel threatened by the notion of assessment as set out in that law. One consistently reproduced idea among members at various union levels (from its executives to teachers in schools) is that evaluations lack a clear intention to provide valuable feedback for teachers’ professional development. On the contrary, they see evaluations as a managerial device to limit teachers’ chances of climbing in their pay scale (for references on similar experiences internationally see Ball (2003) or Roberts-Homes (2015)).

The narrative of bad teaching in the country commonly appeals to the lack of good incentives for good teaching, including underpayment - teachers in Colombia have one of the lowest *Civil service salary scales* - and the lack of effective performance monitoring. Currently, Decrees 2277 from 1979 and 1278 from 2001 regulate the teaching profession in the country, each decree grouping educators according to the date in which they initiated their teaching career (Cifuentes, 2014). Youngest teachers, most of whom fall under Decree 1278, need to pass national exams to progress in their pay level, while older teachers do not. Because of this, many voices point out that increasing the quality of learning will be possible after a generational transition, once all teachers fall under Decree 1278, as then all teachers will have better incentives to continue strengthening their teaching skills. Much less attention is given to the role of students and their households in the whole process (some notable exceptions are the reflections prompted by Palacios (2013) and Cajiao (2014)). This may partly be because mainstream work on school effectiveness in the country assumes that the background of families is beyond the possibilities and explicit responsibilities of the Ministry of Education (See Chapter One).

Regarding the specific debate on classroom observation methodologies, it is easy to trace the way in which education policies in the country reproduce many aspects of the PDM paradigm. For instance, one of the biggest programmes from the Ministry of Education to promote the professionalisation of teachers (the programme *Todos a Aprender*) sees ‘educators as the main bet to improve the practices in the classroom’ (Díaz, Barreira, & Pinheiro, 2015 p. 55. Translated quotation). While the programme has different components, including some strategies to support the improvement of the infrastructure of schools and the strengthening of their managerial practices, the observation method bulks on the measurement of standards in the classroom⁶⁴. Epistemology speaking, such a situation implies a challenge for the country to migrate to different observation methodologies to transcend some of the weaknesses of PDMs, discussed above.

⁶⁴ Such a conclusion jumps immediately from observing an example of an observation rubric of the programme. An example of it is available online at http://aprende.colombiaaprende.edu.co/sites/default/files/Guia%203_%20Ciclo%202_v4.pdf

Table 6. Some characteristics of the observed classrooms

Municipality	School	Subject	Observed group	Gender of the teacher	Legal affiliation of the teacher
X	1	Spanish	10 C	Female	2277/79
X	1	English	10 D	Male	2277/79
X	1	Mathematics	10 B	Male	1278/2002
Y	1	Spanish	10 B	Female	1278/2002
Y	1	English	10 C	Female	2277/79
Y	1	Mathematics	10 A	Male	1278/2002
Y	2	Spanish	10 B	Female	2277/79
Y	2	English	10 C	Male	2277/79
Y	2	Mathematics	10 A	Female	1278/2002

Table 6 summarises the characteristics of the sample of observed classrooms in the three schools in this study. While the objective is not to establish statistical comparisons, the differences between some of the variables show some of the complexities of the Colombian education system described above. For instance, from the nine observed classrooms, five teachers fall under Decree 2277, with the remainder falling under Decree 1278 from 2001. Observed subjects included Mathematics, English and Spanish, all considered as core subject areas in school curricula in the country. The decision to work with senior students assumes that most of them had lived their entire school experience in the same institution and, hence, had (most likely) normalised their relationships with their teachers and peers. However, the project ended up covering 10th graders (instead of 11th graders), due to earlier warnings from teachers and school directors that senior student classrooms devote most of their time to training students to take the standardised tests. Grindle (2004) observed this pattern across different case studies in Latin America. Finally, groups of classes were chosen to avoid observing the same students in different subjects.

As for the conflicting relationships between teachers and the government, some methodological and ethical considerations helped the research team to enter the classrooms. For instance, as this observation project forms part of a broader ethnographic study in the region (around ten months, in total), observations took place only in the last phase of the fieldwork (between May and June of 2015). In previous visits to schools, researchers worked on building trusting relationships with school community members. Likewise, the participation of teachers in the project was voluntary and involved preliminary discussions with each of them during which researchers shared a short document containing all the details of the observation process (i.e. methodology, observation templates, objectives). That same document was presented to the heads of ADEA in the city of Barranquilla (the capital city of the Department of Atlántico). Finally, all classroom observers were undergraduates from a Normal School from one of the municipalities. Normal schools operate like primary and secondary educational institutions that offer two additional years of vocational training for students who want to be certified as teachers at basic and medium levels of education. The observation team was comprised of four female and two male students in the last year of their training to become professional teachers. The lack of gender balance in the observation team reflects the *feminised status* of the teaching profession

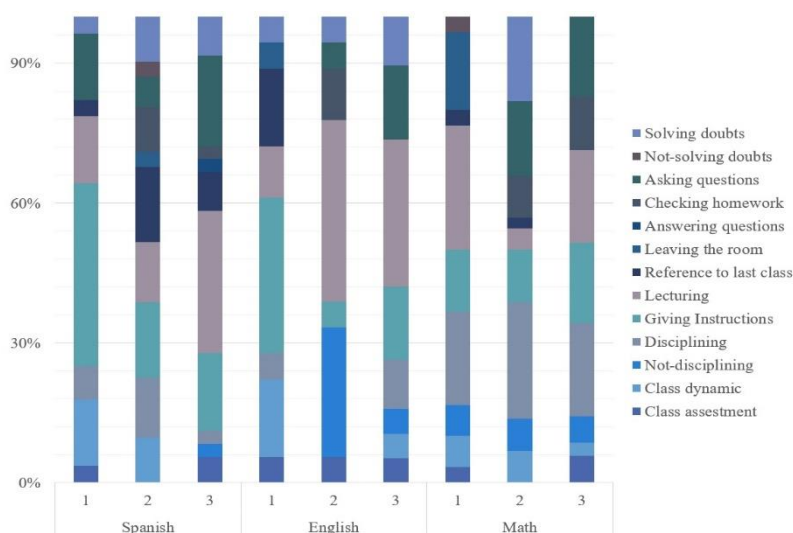
in the country, as there were more female candidates available to make up the team. The entire recruitment process of the observation team took place with the support of the managers of the Normal School vocational training programme, and it was agreed that teacher training students participating in the project would get credit for some of the practice hour requirements needed to get their professional degree.

4.3. CoC in Northern Colombia

4.3.1. Stage one: The what question

Basic descriptors of the whole observation process confirmed Posada's (2009, p. 71) notes on his lesson observations in schools from the region, stating that the time devoted to class is insufficient and inefficient. For example, the average class session lasted 39 minutes (78% of the ideal class time), 29% of the lessons started late, 15% ended before time, and 26% were interrupted by external factors (i.e. announcements from the coordination office). Figures 11 and 12 below show in detail the distribution of the 212 descriptions of classroom events in the different schools per the three observed subjects. The initial coding frame to classify these events was taken from Schoenfeld's (2014) rubric to observe maths lessons. The resulting categories stemmed from an iterative exercise that consisted of testing and refining such codes until their saturation (Schreier, 2012). For the sake of clarity, the information was divided into teachers' events and students' events.

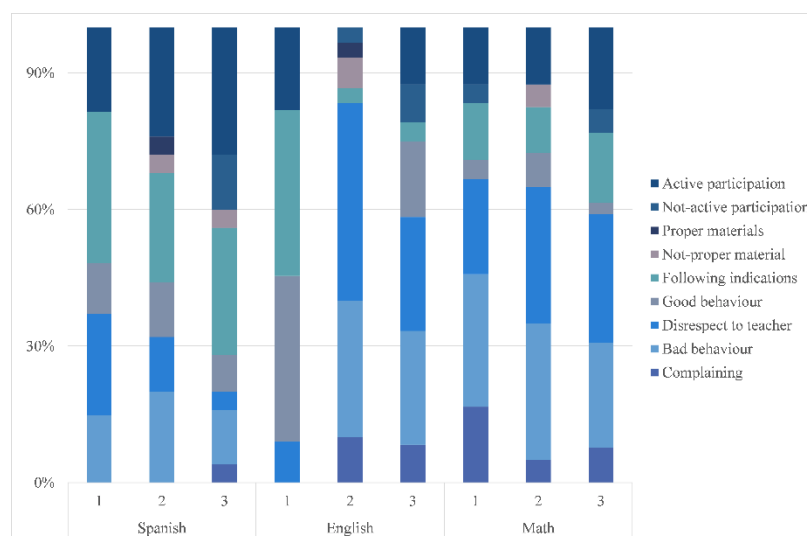
Figure 11. Distribution of teachers' events per classroom



Notes: Categories preceded by a denial (not), describe situations in which there was an issue to which the teacher did not react. For example, not-disciplining describes an event in which students were misbehaving and the teacher did nothing about it.

Both graphs reveal some patterns. For instance, most teachers spend their time either *lecturing* or *giving instructions* (Figure 11). Particularly in the case of maths, teachers also spend an important part of their time *disciplining* students. From the perspective of students (Figure 12), two categories that stand out are *bad behaviour* and *disrespect to the teacher*, both of which refer to a negative attitude expressed by students during class time. Students also showed signs of *active participation* which, contrary to the former examples, are evidence of some level of engagement. Seen together, both graphs show relevant relational dynamics for this study. For instance, expressions of *good behaviour* seem to go together with the use of *class dynamics* by teachers, and with teachers making *reference to the content of the last session* or devoting time to *giving instructions* on class contents and assessments. Then again, disrespectful attitudes towards the teachers tend to be more present in settings where teachers do not react by *disciplining students*. At the same time, *lecturing* time seems to discourage the active *participation* of students, a category that shows a positive relationship with higher frequencies of events representing teachers *answering questions*.

Figure 12. Distribution of students' events per classroom



Note: Categories preceded by a denial (not), describe situations in which there was an ongoing issue and yet the student did not react. For example, not active participation means that there was a class event in which teachers asked a question to the class that students did not answer. There is also a distinction between classroom events reflecting bad behaviour and disrespect to the teacher. In the coding frame, the former accounts for episodes in which students were exhibiting aggressive behaviour towards their peers. The category of good behaviour captures moments in which the observer expressed that 'students are well-behaved'.

4.3.2. Stage two: The how question

This stage tries to identify greater descriptors of class dynamics, emphasising the most frequent class events. Table 7 provides a general description of the results of this stage, now informed by a content analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). The number of nodes, in this case, means the number of quotes (or descriptors) that saturated each category according to the transcripts of team

conversations (using Nvivo). In the rest of this document, all phrases in italics are excerpts from conversations and interviews.

Table 7. Matrix coding of nodes of team meetings

How questions	# nodes
<i>... do teachers deal with disciplinary issues</i>	26
<i>... do teachers convey information to students</i>	44
<i>... do teachers encourage participation</i>	12
<i>... do students (mis)behave</i>	20
<i>... do students participate</i>	15
<i>... do students reveal an interest in the class?</i>	18
<i>... is the class interrupted</i>	14

Lesson observers were mostly interested in discussing teaching methods (how teachers deliver information). One category that seems related to effective learning is the way in which teachers encourage, or not, participation. Observers provided some descriptions about this issue which exhibit tendencies towards restricting students' participation. However, they also found exceptions to this dynamic, as illustrated by the next quote, included here because it conveys a notion of good practice according to educators (the observers themselves) in the region:

[the teacher] started to ask students about their memory of what an argumentative text is and told them to break the concept into its two [compositional] words: 'text' and 'argumentative', to make a case. She gave examples from day-to-day life in the classroom as well as some related to the day-to-day lives of the students. By these means, students were participating during almost the entire class and asked her questions, and she asked questions back (...). It was a little more dynamic because they were all interacting with each other

However, this is not representative of most classrooms. For instance, in some '*male students [participate] little and have no leadership*', while in others, '*female students do not participate (...) they were there staring elsewhere (...) making gestures of boredom*'. In fact, it is more frequent to see limited student engagement in classroom activities, including, for example, a reluctance to submit homework or to answer questions asked by teachers. One of the main challenges related to this is the predominant problem of poor discipline, which undermines teaching-learning dynamics. From discussions with observers, disciplinary issues often emerge as a result of students exhibiting anxiety to leave the room or as a reaction to particular situations that they use to disrupt order:

The teacher was trying to gain back control, but sincerely, in that case, it was almost impossible. It was the last hour (...) Students said that it was hot, they were hungry, sleepy [and] were worried about lunch

There was a lot of disorder at the moment in which students were paying 200 pesos⁶⁵ [for copies of material], Students jumped around

From these quotes, it is evident that the physical or environmental conditions can be factors of disruption. For instance, students are hungry or feel uncomfortable with the conditions of the classroom (i.e. the lack of ventilation). Both situations seem to exceed the possibilities of teachers to keep students engaged. Also, the situation of a teacher collecting money for copies shows how the school failing to supply materials can have a negative impact on class dynamics (i.e. through distractions that lead to disorder). Another relevant element linked to this discussion is the way teachers discipline their students, and how opportune they are. Here observers recorded levels of heterogeneity, from teachers that do nothing in reaction to student's negative attitudes, to some that are more skilled in regaining control:

He did not run into any complications (...) he simply told them that he still had to decide on their final grade (...) [the] students walked around the room and stayed still at their desks

Things do not go bad because immediately after the teacher corrects them and if [they look for] a way to sabotage [the class] she scolds them

The strategies used by educators to persuade students to modify their attitudes deserve further consideration. Some teachers ignore students. Some teachers threaten students with bad grades. During one conversation with observers, one group pointed out that one educator reminded students how bad attitudes are reflected in unsatisfactory results in standardised exams: *'[she] told them that the low performance in Icfes [standardised test scores] was (...) due to (...) indiscipline'*. In contrast, in one specific case, lesson observers reported constant levels of good behaviour and student engagement. Here they emphasised the teacher's skills in keeping the students engaged by keeping them busy (i.e. lots of group activities) and by reacting promptly *'to stop them if they tried to sabotage the class'*.

One last element that is worth mentioning is the great number of class interruptions occurring in these particular schools. Lesson observers noted, for example, the occurrence of extracurricular activities during class time (i.e. a soccer tournament) or one particular case in which the teacher stayed in the teaching lounge while she was supposed to be in the classroom. In one school, observers noticed how the number early school meetings of the whole school community on the football pitch negatively affected class time. These meetings occurred weekly, meaning that children lost at least half an hour of a particular class every week.

4.3.3. Stage three: Towards the why questions

The questions posed by the observers introduce interesting elements for reflection. The observation teams were instructed to identify the type of class events that most caught attention. An evident focus of their concern is discipline in classrooms and the need to encourage class

⁶⁵ This amount of money is equivalent to around 0.06 US dollars or Euros or 0.05 British Pounds.

dynamics and participation. It is also worth mentioning that four of the nine interviewed teachers received an explicit mention from the observers about their good teaching practices. However, in these four cases, the interviewers also referred to the behaviour of students and how teachers need to do something about it. In the sole case where the educator received only positive comments on her skills in maintaining control over her group, she did not hesitate to point out that the group observed was one in which she had already built a long-standing relationship after working with them for many years. That was her way of clarifying that this was not the norm.

So why do children show certain attitudes and behaviours? Most of the educators referred to schools' specific constraints, such as the lack of proper learning spaces, the lack of texts or books and the non-suitability of the school infrastructure for region's specific warm weather. The following two interview excerpts exemplify these situations and highlight relevant elements that are related to them. For instance, problems in this regard do not only mean a lack of pedagogical teaching resources, but also appear to affect the students' willingness to study because they feel uncomfortable in the classroom:

Observation team (OT): Is it frequent for the class to finish before due time?

Teacher (T): In the last hours of the day we have to do this because sometimes they feel overwhelmed, they become desperate, but during the first hours they do wait for the bell (...) the last hours in school are a little traumatic. First, we see the heat (...) Ventilation is not completely working (...) They should be having their breakfast around half past six [in the morning]

Moreover, during the observations, the session observers mentioned some episodes in which the teacher had to collect money from students to pay for copies of written material. One of the teachers explained that such money comes from teachers' pockets, and not from the school's budget.

Observation team (OT): For us, the students, [English as a second language] is not a priority subject. However (...) one of the recommendations we [would like to share with] you, is to use more didactic materials and more ludic activities to wake up their motivation and participation

Teacher (T): the thing is that we lack didactical material, so we have to [buy it] and sometimes this is from our own pockets

Interviews also revealed that some strategies used by schools to prevent internal problems create other challenges. Consider, for instance, the following response from one of the interviewed teachers, when asked about discipline in his classroom:

Observation team (OT): Another thing that caught our attention was the behaviour of students

Teacher (T): Well, hmm (...) I think that I have already commented at one point that you chose one of the hardest groups we have in 10th grade

That was not the first time that teachers referred to groups as being problematic as compared to other groups. In informal conversations with school coordinators, they explained to the research team that students are split into groups from the first year of the secondary school according to criteria such as their age. Nonetheless, apparently, some groups of students systematically lag behind, partly because they become stigmatised as *the children that are harder to teach*.

Educators also mentioned issues that we will typify as external to the school. For instance, the lack of support from parents and the general socio-economic conditions of families in shaping attitudes in students (considering that many of these children live with relatives other than their parents):

Observation team (OT): Why do you think that the students show such a lack of interest in the English class?

Teacher (T): About that, we need to be very clear in mentioning that the problem that affects students in all senses today, is the actual education they receive from their parents. There we find apathy and the [origins of] the lack of respect. We no longer have students with real values

In the last part of the interview, observers were instructed to ask specifically about the teachers' perceptions of current education policies, and the way these might affect observed classroom dynamics. The following quotes summarise the most recurring views on this issue:

There are a lot of positive things, for instance, in the area of English language we have received support from the government (...). The students themselves show themselves to be reciprocally motivated towards the English language, but, for instance, I have a class with 40 motivated students, and I think that such a number is too high to work in the way it should be done.

The education policy has driven quality down (...) because of [the efforts to grant] access [to education], secondly because some kids are forced to come to school so [their household] can claim [the subsidy] for [Familias en Acción]⁶⁶

I think that education has been affected by the issuance of [Decree] 230 [in 2002] that refers to the process of [grades] re-try, re-try and re-try (...) I know that we have to help the student, but we should not make things that easy

Back in [the 70s] parents were more devoted [to their children] while today they only bring them comfort (...). [Children] feel forced to come to school (...). Previous generations used to study harder, were more competitive (...) now they are only interested in receiving their diploma, and that's all (...) some are stuck at home and do not build a career

⁶⁶ Familias en Acción is the biggest conditional cash transfer in Colombia. It pays low income households a monthly subsidy to send children to school.

These quotes reinforce previous arguments given by teachers – such as the shift in values among generations – and introduces new elements into the discussion. One of these is the duality between access and quality, which is a common argument in policy discussions. A second element corresponds to the *no children left behind culture*⁶⁷ and the way it diminishes the incentives to study hard – according to educators. In the third place, educators refer to the way in which other government initiatives to counteract poverty – such as conditioned cash transfers - have modified parent-teacher relations. In the past, educators would argue, parents, respected more to the authority and the role of teachers. Today, teachers note, parents have other incentives such as having access to state subsidies.

4.4. Conclusion

Throughout the three stages of the analysis described in this Chapter, it was possible to identify some patterns and consider possible causal forces operating in the sites of the current research. Before proceeding with the discussion, it is important to restate the importance of the innovation of this Chapter in linking classroom observations (an activity that is usually left out from the repertoire of approaches informing national and local education debates (O'Sullivan, 2006)) to the study of school failure. However, the same caveat from the previous Chapter applies: that is to say, the innovation here is not in the way of engaging in the analyses of the data per se, but in the concepts used to situate such an analysis in a broader policy discussion (beyond the physical space of the classroom).

Regarding the analytical findings, the lack of discipline and proper behaviour, and the limited engagement of students in the classroom are two prevailing features of classroom dynamics in the researched schools. The levels of heterogeneity in teachers' engagement and skills in encouraging students indicate, however, that not all teachers are poorly prepared, as mainstream SE research suggests (see Chapter One). Some teachers do their best with the scarce resources they have. Some others show their frustration and hence do little to become more active educators. Schools have initiatives to deal with problematic students, such as grouping students by age (a variable that is often correlated with students' levels of engagement), which sometimes ends the generating of stigmas (i.e. the problem child) that can negatively affect the learning process of specific students.

Combining sources of information allows building hypotheses about the potential structural forces acting upon teachers and students at the research site. Broadly speaking, students' poor engagement seems to be related to the conflict between educational standards, family structures, and the lack of opportunities students see in a *good* education (quoting one teacher, '*some are stagnated at home and do not build a career*'). This argument also finds support in the fact that, according to educators, families seem to be more enthusiastic about the compensation received for sending their children to school rather than about actually fostering children's learning

⁶⁷ It is important to mention, however, that Decree 1290 from 2009 modified Decree 230 from 2002, which established an upper cohort of 5% regarding failing students. The new legislation does not set a specific standard, but gives autonomy to schools to define their evaluation criteria.

processes (by establishing, for example, good relationships with teachers). These latter situations and conditions, added to the lack of basic requirements (i.e. proper infrastructure) are important barriers for teachers to exercise their agency as educators.

The findings in this Chapter complement those discussed in Chapter Three (and H1, H2 and H3 in that Chapter) with evidence not only from the perception of school actors but also with observations that confirm many of the concerns expressed by them. Altogether, one can identify a generalised disregard for education, at least from the perspective of students and parents, that illustrates the lack of priority it represents in the day-to-day life of people. The accounts by educators allows going deeper into the possible causes of this, motivating the researcher to explore further some elements of the political economy of education in the Colombian Caribbean. Educators mention three factors that seem important and deserve further inquiry. Those are, (i) the idea of education as a means to generate economic opportunities for families; (ii) the link between educational problems and the spreading of human rights; and (iii) the link between education and policy planning in other sectors of the economy. This last element seems to be an important one as, according to the interviewed educators, some poverty alleviation policies in the country might discourage students and parents from pursuing the improvement of certain education goals (i.e. for students to perform better in tests).

PART III: ON EDUCATIONAL STRUCTURES

Part III of the dissertation focuses on the study of the formation of educational structures in Northern Colombia. In its two chapters, the reader will find an analysis of different sources, including interviews with key informants, legislation retrieved in a historical archive and a newspaper content analysis. Given the complexity of this study, this part is considerably longer than the other ones in the dissertation. As discussed before, the realist logic of the MGA entails studying first the parts of the structure and agency debate and then their interactions. All causal findings emerging from the analysis of social structures are necessarily provisional. The establishment of a causal process, and hence, the refinement of these first insights into the way education policy and institutions influence educational results in the territory, makes up part of the discussion in Part IV of the dissertation.

The same disclaimers about the exploratory character of this thesis apply to the reading of these sections as those discussed in the introduction to this document and in the preface to Part II. The intention to use the MGA as a DSMT to build a middle-range theory about school failure in Northern Colombia entails, once again, entering a *grey* area. Such a reference in this part of the document concerns the study of the formation of social structures in time and, hence, the study of history using CR lenses. With some exceptions, as Chapter Five contends, the available literature does not provide empirical examples on how to engage in the building of historical narratives in a way that they contribute to the process of theorising emergence (i.e. the persistence of school failure) in society. The argument, however, needs some disentanglement. One claim is the need to historicise social analysis to build causal explanations about social phenomena. That is what Archer's (1995) explanatory framework is all about (and, therefore, that is the task of the last chapter of the thesis). Another claim is about the building of narratives of history itself (i.e. the building of what pre-exists social action) to account for the independent study of the socio-educational contexts (see the discussion about the research design in Chapter Two) in which social actors interact. The following excerpt from Wickham's (2011) work, quoted more recently by Mutch (2014) helps to elucidate one of the possible challenges of this second understanding of the role of history in realist research:

Historians tend to avoid theorising; it is one of the most characteristic cultural features of the discipline, in fact. But it is also one of its major weak points, for the attachment of historians to the empiricist-expository mode only-too-often hides their theoretical presuppositions, not only from others, but from the writers themselves. As a result, historians can fall into contradictory arguments, and risk overall incoherence; entire historical debates have, on occasion, depended on theoretical presuppositions which were indefensible (Mutch, 2014, p. 227).

Before proceeding with the argument that this preface to Part III of the thesis intends to raise, the reader should be aware of the scarcity of bibliography available about the history of education in the Colombian Caribbean. More specifically, the literature offers virtually nothing comprehensive (away from some scattered mentioning in some books and articles) about the

history of the creation of educational institutions in the Department of Atlántico. All of that is relevant to mention to argue that this dissertation needs to build these historical accounts before using them to engage into a structure and agency type of analysis. If that were not the case (that is, if the literature offered detailed accounts about those specific processes), the reflection on how to build historical narratives would be (fairly) unnecessary. Under such setting, the thesis could simply draw on secondary sources as chronological accounts of general events from which to start the process of theorisation (in the terms established by the MGA)⁶⁸. However, under the current circumstances, the question on how to build those narratives does become relevant, and hence the importance of considering Wickham's (2011) critique to the methodological tradition in the discipline of history. Said differently, one suitable way of building those accounts to make them as less incoherent as possible is to lay down some basic realist principles to support that exercise. Or, as Mutch (2014) expresses it

‘... those taking a CR perspective will need to read historical work against their general conceptual understanding; in other words, to return to the notion of CR as an under-labourer in order to be able to distinguish those secondary works of most value in informing them of the historical contexts to their studies (p. 228)

The methodological proposals of the following two chapters (as part of those innovations in methods announced in the introduction to the thesis), hence once more profits from the implications of dialectics in CR. To recapitulate the discussion about dialectical CR from Chapter Three, this is ‘to treat the research context [educational dynamics in the Department of Atlántico] as a self-contained (external) totality that nevertheless refracts the wider totality of which it is apart’ (Roberts, 2014). In operational terms, that means considering narratives of a totality called the *History of Education in Colombia*, for which there is a compelling amount of literature, as a basis to read and to provide meaning to primary sources collected during the field research. That is the specific proposal for supporting the methodological (and the empirical) arguments raised in Chapter Five, via the exploration of legislation produced by the Department's Assembly of. Chapter Six explores a variation of that same rationale, by examining newspaper data based on narratives by school inspectors about recent events (from 2001 to

⁶⁸ In Archer's (1995) account ‘*analytical* narratives are obviously distinct from any version of historical narration *tout court*, for although social realists in general have no difficulty in accepting the strong likelihood of uniqueness at the level of events, the endorsement of real but unobservable generative mechanisms directs analysis towards the interplay between the real, the actual and the empirical to explain precise outcomes’ (p. 343). It is clear, however, that every narrative about the (events in the) history of education in Colombia is a fallible one. One way of dealing with that fact is by bringing onto the table different narratives. Another path is to raise the issue that the object of this investigation is the persistence of education failure in some regions and not education as a whole or at a National level. For this specific study, one can, therefore, consider narratives about the national level as *fixed*, and use them as a heuristic device to build, via contrast (between primary and secondary sources of information), a narrative about education policy dynamics at the regional level. If one takes realist ontology seriously, given the principles of dialectics endorsed by CR, the new understandings of local narratives will eventually help to refine the understanding of history at higher levels (the national, the international). That is part of the iterative logic of abduction and reproduction. For the time being, and insisting upon the focus of this exploratory research, the dissertation focusses only in the first part of that dialectical reasoning.

2014) in primary and secondary education politics in the region. This second type of inquiry will talk more about the phases of social interaction described in Figure 3 of Chapter Two⁶⁹, meaning that it will focus relatively more on the study of the present. The introduction to Chapter Six elaborates further on this and its methodological implications.

⁶⁹ Chronologically (see the cycle) those interactions occur in the present tense (or, at least, under the actual form of, for instance, educational institutions).

Chapter Five: A fragmented Decentralisation and the formation of the Colombian (and one regional) Educational System

5.1. Introduction

The ideas to be discussed in this Chapter and the one that follows seem to resonate quite well with Soifer's (2015) view about the *lack of educational initiative in Colombia*, at least in the case of policy developments in the northern region of the country⁷⁰. According to this scholar:

Unlike any of the other [country] cases, political elites in Colombia never made a concerted effort to build a national school system (...) In all, the limited development of Colombia's education system is striking in comparative perspective. But more notable is that the Colombian state never undertook a project of education development. While political leaders of all stripes valued schooling as a necessary component of modernization and progress, they never undertook a systematic effort to build public schools, monitor the quality of education, or standardize the school system. The Colombian state lagged far behind its counterparts in education development throughout the first century after independence, a reflection of its lack of commitment to increasing its control over society and territory (p. 137).

Soifer's (2015) statement above serves as a guide (or hypothesis) to study the formation of educational structures in the recent decades in the country. This Chapter engages in that task. In doing so, it follows the methodological advice discussed in section 2.4.3, as it seeks 'to include knowledge about the historical specificity and relationships of refraction [from a totality called the National Education Policy] in the concrete empirical research context' (Roberts, 2014, p. 14). Mutch's (2014) discussion of empirical methods to analyse historical documents using CR is of much relevance here as it relates (at least implicitly) to that goal. For this last author, two core principles should guide the realist approach to these types of analyses. The first one states that primary sources need to be read bearing in mind that these were produced in a particular historical context. Likewise, and in line with the logic of abductive/retroductive research, secondary sources do not solely provide *context information* but serve as a window to access more discourses about the way in which historical objects (i.e. education institutions) emerge in time (see the discussion in the preface to this section).

The structure of the Chapter reflects the above logic. The first section explores the recent history of the contemporary Colombian education system, from its inception in the early 1970s, and its main transformations across what scholars brand the neoliberal era of educational reform (Gómez-Buendía, 1998; Vanegas, 2003). The use (and contrast) of secondary sources serves this

⁷⁰ Studies on the process state building in the country, such as Parada's (2013), show that while there is a general notion of a weak state in the country, historical trends vary quite importantly among the distinctive sub regions of the country. Hence, country wise generalisations are problematic.

purpose and offers a background to contrast and provide meaning to educational events observed across time in the Department of Atlántico. The building of the recent regional history of education builds on archival data retrieved from the historical archive from the Chamber of Deputies, which accounts for the maximum level of democratic deliberation in the Department (ESAP, DNP, 2011). The last section of the Chapter brings in interview data from the author's conversations with public servants and teachers' organisations at the national and regional levels to further contribute in elucidating the meaning of different historical trends in education policy at the study site.

5.2. The (recent) history of education policy in Colombia

Some readers might find Soifer's (2015) quote at the beginning of this Chapter shocking. For the inhabitants of contemporary Colombia, to say that there is not a national education project sounds quite unfounded. According to influential scholars in the realm of secondary education policymaking, while one can still identify multiple challenges in the sector, its evolution and results over the years is more than evident. In recent years, they indicate, '[education] coverage rates have improved at the national level, and [policy makers] have started to think on how to improve existent policies to achieve a better distribution of the quality of education' (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2014, p. 317). In that regard, problems such as the lagging behind of the country in international standards (i.e. school performance), is a result of a *timid* use of existing mechanisms to foster deeper educational changes. In some cases, as these influential scholars argue, it will be enough to refine these policy instruments to increase the *rhythm of improvement* that education is currently experiencing.

The optimism expressed Barrera-Osorio et al., (2014), vis-à-vis Soifer's (2015) negativity might be partially explained by the fact that they are both speaking about different time frames. The second author, for example, initiates his analysis at the dawn of the 20th century, while Barrera-Osorio et al. (2014) place their focus in the developments of education policies in the last two decades. Contrasting both views, however, unveils the importance of not only exploring what institutions such as the Ministry of Education are doing today to improve the standards of primary and secondary education, but also examining how those institutions came to exist in their current form. Archer's (2011) understanding of social change as a combination of 'the diachronic developments of such [socio-educational] systems and *also* (...) the synchronic presence of those parts in those relations and those specific moments over which they endured' (p. 62) is, once again, relevant. However, as discussed in the preface to this part of the thesis, the unleashing of an analytic understanding of the historical emergence of education in Colombia makes up part of the MGA-type of analysis discussed in Chapter Seven. This is the combination of a synchronic and a diachronic interpretation of education to theorise about why the phenomenon of school failure persists in some regions of Northern Colombia. The aim of this section refers more concisely to the diachronic elements of the analysis by providing an account of the chronology of educational events from the inception of today's educational structures (arguably in the late 1960s) to present times. Such a reconstruction of events, as also announced

above, will serve as a base upon which further sections of this Chapter will elaborate to build that same chronological narrative but situated in the context of the Department of Alántico.

5.2.1. *Towards the centralisation of the administration of education (1968-1982)*

Carlos Lleras Restrepo's mandate as president (1966-1970) introduced *The National Transformation*. Much of the reforms of his government pursued a redistribution of political power within the state in an attempt to contain political disputes between members of the Liberal and Conservative parties inherited from previous decades (Sierra, 2015). Along with his Minister of Education, Octavio Arizmendi Posada, former President Lleras 'put into motion a major attempt to administrative development that would, they hoped, significantly upgrade the quality of administrative services supporting public education' (Hanson, 1983, p. 89). The general aim was to introduce reforms to *centralise the public administration of education* (Hanson, 1995), with measures to improve the technical efficiency of the sector and to invite Governors of all Colombian sub-regions (or Departments) to adhere to a national education project. Such an effort complemented more transversal initiatives to increase the role of the state in the economy (Ocampo et al., 2007a; Parada, 2013), but clashed with the inertia of the governing elites that had never before engaged in a nationwide educational plan (Soifer, 2015).

One major structural shift in educational institutions was the introduction of delegates (or *delegados*) from the Ministry of Education (MEN). *Delegados* in each Governorship were funded by resources from the nascent Regional Educational Funds (FERs), an organisation created in 1968 to de-concentrate Treasury roles (to pay teachers) and to expand services in primary, secondary and tertiary education in the regions (Torres & Duque, 1994; Helg, 1986). Before the existence of *delegados*, the Secretariat of Education in each Department was accountable only to the Governor, leaving the Ministry unaware of what was going on in schools across the country. Hence, the 'role of this delegate was to ensure that all financial expenditure and hiring decisions made by the Governors and educational secretaries were consistent with national policy' (Hanson, 1995).

Despite an initial resistance among regional elites to allow *delegados* to exercise their roles as inspectors in the administration of public resources, by the mid-1970s they had gained acceptance and recognition. Hanson (1983) expounds three elements which potentially explain such a turn. Firstly, by 1973, most public servants, including Governors, education secretaries and *delegados* were new, and hence there was a whole new generation less prone to the *old ways* of government. That opened up the scope for a cultural readjustment in government practices. Secondly, new top-down pressures for the role of *delegados* and FERs emerged as the MEN saw in these figures an opportunity to improve its administrative linkages with local (educational) authorities. *Delegados* 'made excellent hand and ears out in the regions' (Hanson, 1983, p. 101), serving, amongst other things, as communication channels and as compilers of statistical information. Thirdly, these institutions experienced bottom-up pressures, as local education actors (including students, teachers and parents) saw in these civil servants efficient channels to convey their grievances to the central government, but also to get valuable information on the

interpretation of relevant laws, and guidance on how to carry out some administrative procedures.

However, this stage of adjustment of the *delegados* was not free of new emergent challenges (or problems). As the French *Colombianist* historian Aline Helg (1986) points out, a new reform to FERs in 1975 augmented the power of *delegados*, thus politicising the figure and its functions. That was in opposition to the technical role originally ascribed to them. However, as *delegados* became more political and less technical, they managed to gain the respect of departmental governments, thus strengthening their power to exercise their surveillance and control roles (Helg, 1986, p. 155). That power also translated in the growth in number of the personnel hired by FERs; ‘in short, what had begun as an individual *delegado* working alone in a small isolated office had become a budding bureaucracy. Some offices expanded from two or three people to 30 or more within a period of 2 years’ (Hanson, 1983, p. 101). This process of politicisation continued to deepen into the 1980s, until the new reforms in the early 1990s.

However, the fiscal pressures of the late 1960s to have a better organised education system clashed with emergent public demand for political decentralisation in the 1980s. According to Faguet & Sánchez (2008) ‘[t]he late 1970s saw levels of violence rise again as the internal conflict intensified. At the same time, social protests and pressures from regional groups multiplied, linked to the central state’s inability to meet demands for social services and public investment’ (p. 1299). On the one hand, between 1958 and 1980 enrollment in secondary education increased by 820% (Helg, 1986), which implied a growing pressure for considerable new investments in the sector. Likewise, the growing affluence of students from less privileged households in an educational system dominated by the private sector and the church resulted in the opening of public institutions around the country, funded, quite importantly, with resources from international credits⁷¹. However, the low integration between students from different economic backgrounds in school resembled the class privileges of previous decades, a situation that contributed to the low social esteem for public education (Helg, 1986)⁷². The reputation of teachers from public schools was also questioned, contributing to a strengthening of the political struggle of teaching unions (Ramírez & Téllez, 2007)⁷³. The Colombian Federation of Educators (FECODE) pushed for the creation of a new teaching statute (Decree 2277 from 1979) which united, for the first time, political representation of teachers from primary and secondary education.

⁷¹ As will be discussed in the next section, such a new economic dependence on multilateral institutions entailed new commitments to align the national curricula with international standards.

⁷² The case of the National Institutes of Diversified Secondary Education (INEM) is illustrative of this situation. According to Helg, (1986) these institutions were first established in 1969, responding to the lasting hope of education administrators to create a type of technical (or vocational) education that worked as an alternative to the classic high school. Given the nature of their educational supply, and because they were built primarily in poor neighbourhoods, they failed to attract students from high-income households. The constitution of INEMs, including the training of teachers and administrators, received technical support from the US government, and the World Bank funded 35% of the project.

⁷³ According to Ramírez & Téllez (2007), the expansion in the number of teachers, because of the expansion of the educational sector, strengthened teaching unions. FECODE was born in 1962 out of a convergence of Department teachers’ associations. Across 1970s, this organisation organised a series of strikes that helped it to reach its goals in terms of the increase in teachers’ salaries and access to skill training services (p. 502).

5.2.2. *The ‘push’ back: the first wave of political decentralisation (1983-2000)*

The decade of the 1980s started with a set of reforms to give more autonomy to local authorities. The following excerpt from Ocampo et al. (2007b) illustrates quite succinctly the new emerging decentralisation model and the institutional resistance it would start to face in the upcoming decade:

The decentralization model that emerged in Colombia has been (...) a hybrid between one in which territorial governments are essentially executing desired central policies (the *agent / principal* model, according to the current terminology), which prevailed until the 1980s, and a local public election, in which local authorities enjoy real autonomy in the definition of their policies, and are directly responsible to the citizens for the services they provide. This hybrid model is characterized by its difficulty to accurately determine the responsibilities of the different levels of government and to coordinate the different sources of financing (p. 396. *Original emphasis. Translated quotation*).

The new model, at least in its formal conception, had its origin in Law 14 of 1983, which held local governments responsible for land, cadastral and property taxes (Gutiérrez, 2010). President Virgilio Barco’s (1986-1990) government created the context for the birth of the Basic Statute of Municipal Administration (Law 11 of 1986) and the introduction of free elections for Governors and Mayors. In terms of education, Law 12 of 1986, increased cash transfers from the national state to local governments and assigned the latter the administration of schools’ infrastructure – formerly that task had been under the responsibility of the Colombian Institute of School Infrastructure, a unit attached to the MEN. Two years later, in 1988, Law 24 restructured the Ministry to prepare it for the new decentralisation scheme and, while it kept the administration of teachers’ wages as a responsibility of the central state, it granted local authorities a role in hiring and administrating teaching bodies.

The new Constitution of 1991 further defined this decentralisation scheme by (re)establishing the roles and responsibilities of the governments of Colombian sub-regions (municipalities, clustered in Departments). In the midst of the urgency to pacify the country, education was, however, not much of a priority for the members of the Constituent Assembly (Cajiao, 2004), nor for many representatives of local governments. For example, ‘only 70 percent of the municipalities had accepted responsibility for the local schools by October 1992 (...) [by arguing that] many schools were known to be understaffed, in great need of repair and insufficient in number to meet local demand’ (Hanson, 1995, p. 115). For the MEN, following Hanson (1995), the idea of decentralising functions to more than a thousand newly created municipalities seemed unfeasible. In the Ministry’s view, as the top level educational authority of the country, it would be a great relief if they could instead decentralise administrative tasks at the intermediate level of the Department, ‘which, in turn, could decentralise to municipalities’ (Hanson, 1995, p. 113). For De la Calle (2007), however, the spin-off of the new *Carta Magna* focused on the municipality as an administrative unit, which explains why, even today, departments lack identity and their institutional role is still confusing.

Parallel to these national dynamics, internationally two discourses around the role of education in society were taking place. On the one hand, during the 1980s and 1990s, the World Bank developed a distinctive policy agenda for education. By '[d]rawing heavily on the economic theories of human capital (...) [it] was able to produce a strong internal rationale for the rapid expansion of (...) lending in education (...) intersected with its approach to structural adjustment' (Mundy & Verger, 2015, p. 11). This is relevant to the study of the recent formation of Colombian education policies because, during the 1996-2012 period, the country became one of the top borrowers from those funds. On the other hand, in 1989 the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the Convention of Children's Human Rights, which included the right to education. According to Cajiao (2004), the impact of these international forces shaped the configuration of the National Constituent Assembly that gave birth to the New Colombian Constitution of 1991. Four out of its five working commissions devoted efforts to educational reform, with one of them studying education as a right and another exploring it as an economic affair.

Towards the middle of the 1990s, FECODE pushed for a national education project. At this time, the international views about education mentioned in the last paragraph (*education as a right* and *education as a driver of the economy*) became competing forces in the struggle towards new educational reforms. Cajiao (2004) is one of the academic authorities discussing the *pact for educational reform* in Colombia, in the context of the new constitutional setting. In his view:

[One] aspect of debate pitted those who defended the need for a statutory law which regulated the right to education as a fundamental right, and a sector leaning towards a law regulating the provision of educational services. In this last group, FECODE got enrolled, by arguing that in the Constitution it was not explicit the definition of education as a fundamental right, despite that the judgments of the Constitutional Court ratified the fundamental nature of the right to education. With the loss of the opportunity to advance in the direction indicated by the Constitutional Court, the need for regulation of the right to education was left pending (Cajiao, 2004, p. 41. *Translated quotation*).

According to Cajiao (2004) the Federation of Educators was inclined to take a regulatory position in the debate, a position that was also appealing to representatives of the national government (understanding education as a service entailed focusing the debate on efficient ways of delivering it). In a sense, FECODE was not satisfied with the general idea of decentralising the administration of education, in particular in relation to teachers' salaries and their formerly acquired benefits. Strategically, '[such] action would fragment the union's power base because salary talks would be carried out at a regional or local levels by many negotiating units rather than at the national level by a single unit' (Hanson, 1995, p. 113). Unfortunately for the national debate, and for many sectors of academia and civil society, FECODE and the government ended up, using Cajiao's (2004) words, imposing a bilateral agenda, under which the General Education Law (Law 115) was published in 1994.

The new normative framework continued to deepen the decentralised structure of the sector in the first half of the decade. Importantly, it moved the administration of Regional Educational Funds from the Ministry of Education to the heads of Departments (Governors) and granted some degree of organisational and pedagogical autonomy to educational institutions (Ramírez & Téllez, 2007). Iregui, Melo & Ramos (2006) emphasise, nonetheless, the *semi-autonomy* of schools, even though they now had a School Government and their own Institutional Educational Plan (PEI). In the legislation that was prompted by Law 115, financial transfers did not reach schools directly, but through local governments, heavily influenced by ‘different pressure groups’ (Iregui, Melo, & Ramos, 2006, p. 183). Likewise, school directors had virtually no say on issues such as the hiring of teachers and administrative staff, nor in the making of relevant decisions about pedagogy and curriculum (Hanson, 1995). In terms of teachers’ pay, Law 60 of 1993 had created a Fiscal Account (*Situado Fiscal*) that transferred resources from the central state to sub-regional authorities. That is to say, the reform impeded granting Departments and Municipalities the ability to define pay scales, but also the disciplinary control of educators (Franco, 2011).

Despite this initial *pushback* from educational centralisation during the 1990s, the early balance of the process, according to Hanson (1995), was not very satisfactory. The many controversies listed above also included clashes within institutions of the central executive power. One natural ally of the whole process was the Department of National Planning, DNP, an institution that, however, viewed the priorities of decentralising differently from those of the highest level educational authority. For planning authorities, the process of decentralisation should pursue the principle of maximising citizen’s representation, arguing, hence, for bypassing Departments to decentralise core decision-making to municipalities. The totality of these multiple disputes resulted in confusions about roles and responsibilities. In short:

Decentralization was intended to be an integral part of the strategy to save the nation from the escalating chaos. Along the way, however, administrative decentralisation of education lost contact with the needs of political decentralisation. Because no clear educational decentralisation model was developed, and because no shared vision of reform existed among the participating parties (e.g., MEN, DNP, unions, and municipalities), no rational distribution of tasks was possible. Thus, these first years were dominated by power struggles, as various parties attempted to shape educational reform according to their own goals and vested interests (Hanson, 1995, pp. 117, 118).

In between these struggles, the regulatory emphasis of educational reform prevailed. Gómez-Buendía (1998) described the political transformation of this period as one with a clear *liberal strain*, as it combined principles of efficiency, deregulation, focalisation and participation. Likewise, for Vanegas (2003), ‘[c]apitalism, globalization and the prevalence of new right ideologies in the Colombian international context are features that influenced educational reform of the 1990s’ (p. 231). Illustrative of this logic was the creation of the Compensatory Education Fund (FEC) in 1996 to solve financial problems with teachers’ salaries (Barrera-Osorio, 2005) and the institutionalisation, since 1991, of standardised test scores to measure the

efficiency of education in schools (Ramírez & Téllez, 2007). The financial shortages - deepened by an economic crisis in 1999 (Bonet, Pérez, & Ayala, 2014) - and the mediocre performance of students in national exams, further justified that view. The 1998 National Development Plan announced austerity measures and placed the focus of the debate on the efficient use of resources. Scholars started to talk about the need to migrate from a supply-based view of education policy (i.e. the building of schools) to a demand-driven one (Iregui, Melo, & Ramos, 2006). But Colombia was not the only country experiencing such new trends. In those same years, The World Bank announced 'its [revitalised] focuses on poverty alleviation, and restructuring its practices to become more *client centred*' (Mundy & Verger, 2015, p. 13. *Original emphasis*). While it is imprecise to talk of a North-South imposition, these principles were an influence 'reproduced uncritically by agents within the Colombian state' (Vanegas, 2003, p. 245).

5.2.3. *Gaining back control: towards a new centralisation (2001-2010s)*

Paraphrasing a former Secretary of Education of Bogotá - capital city of Colombia - despite the efforts towards concertation in the education reforms during the 1990s, the new millennium saw a detour to an overriding emphasis of the debate on matters of efficiency (Cajiao, 2004). The Legislative Act of 2001 amended some articles of the Colombian Constitution of 1991 to create the General Participation System (SGP), which organised in a single budget the state's resources devoted to primary and secondary education. Regulated by Law 715 from the same year, the monetary transfers from the central state to local governments endorsed new criteria of fiscal responsibility for municipalities by applying systems of certification based on debt and solvency indicators (Barrera-Osorio, 2005; Iregui, Melo, & Ramos, 2006). Law 60 from 1993 established the index of Unsatisfied Basic Needs (NBI) of Municipalities as a parameter for the distribution of educational resources but scholars had seen the NBI as inconvenient as it did not reflect the educational capacities of the different territories. Law 715 had established that a more efficient indicator was to consider the number of students enrolled at different academic levels, and the number of those lacking any access to education.

This new legislation emphasised the roles and responsibilities of the different actors in the National Education Policy. The focus here was on the regulation of basic and secondary education. The central state dealt with the formulation of policy aims (including a set of basic principles that should guide the design of schools' study plans), the regulation of educational services, and the distribution of the education budget to subnational governments. Departments and certified municipalities⁷⁴, on the other hand, were made responsible for the management of educational institutions and the allocation and evaluation of the performance of school directors and teachers. One year later the publication of Law 715, Decree 1278 from 2002 introduced the *New Statute for the Professionalisation of Educators*, which linked access to primary and secondary

⁷⁴ According to Decree 2700 from 2004, if a municipality wants to receive a certification in education, it should have at least 100,000 inhabitants and must fulfil some requirements: 1) have an education policy explicitly defined in the local development plan that is aligned with the national education policy, 2) meet basic criteria in the organisation of educational institutions, 3) rely on a body of public servants that meets basic criteria to administer educational services, 4) show institutional capacity to monitor and generate information about the functioning of the local education policy.

education and the rise in teachers' pay scales to students' performance in national exams administrated by the National Commission of the Civil Service - part of the central state. Before the New Statute, the *old* one (Decree 2277 from 1979), linked pay increases only to years in the service. For Brutti & Sánchez & (2017), '[t]he New Regulation introduced permanent evaluation practices, aiming at ensuring a continued satisfactory performance by teachers, as well as providing them with incentives to improve over time' (p. 5). Gindin & Finger (2013) and Cubillos (2014) highlight, however, that teachers expressed discontent towards the sanctionary character of Decree 1278, as they perceived evaluations as not objective and as responding to a market-based logic.

All reforms exalt the spirit of the decentralisation process, which, according to Ocampo, Romero, & Parra (2007b) find theoretical underpinnings in rationalist economic theory. As Faguet & Sánchez describe the Colombian reforms in the journal *Public Choice*, 'competition and local democracy provide[d] local officials with the information and incentives they need to allocate their own resources in a manner responsive to voters' needs' (p. 247). Hence, administrative efforts in reorganising the system continued to pursue the strengthening of local capacities. Crucial for that task was the attempt to modernise the administrative role of local Secretariats of Education. Meade & Geade (2008) characterise such an initiative as one that emerged from policy recommendations from the World Development Report 2004 to 'create standards and protocols to ensure that resources are used efficiently and equitably' (p. 312). Policy documents from the National Planning Council for Economic and Social Policy (CONPES) published in 2005 and 2011 made proposals in that direction. Likewise, in seeking to also transfer responsibilities directly to schools, Decree 1055 established new pecuniary incentives (or monetary rewards) on school directors who showed improvements in their students' overall performance in state standardised exams (Barrera-Osorio, Maldonado, & Rodriguez, 2014).

In terms of more *client-driven* policy approaches, Barrera-Osorio, Maldonado, & Rodriguez (2014) present a summary of initiatives by recent governments to improve educational indicators. The biggest of all is the programme (*Más*) *Familias en Acción*, which, since 2002, has paid poor households to send their children to school. Impact assessments conclude, so far, that this programme 'has positive effects on school enrollment and attendance, but the impact on cognitive achievement and graduation rates is less clear' (OECD, 2015, p. 28). Other important interventions include the Rural Education project (PER), also active since the early 2000s, and *Computadores para Educar* (where schools are recipients of used computers to contribute in the learning process of children). Since 2007, after the publication of the renowned, worldwide McKinsey reports, much of the international debate on teaching and learning has emphasised teaching excellence (Coffield, 2012)⁷⁵. Current policy efforts in the country include, hence, the professionalisation of teaching bodies by providing scholarships for educators to get postgraduate degrees (García, Maldonado, Perry, Rodríguez, & Saavedra, 2014). Efforts on this front are complemented by the *Todos a Aprender* programme, during which teachers observe their

⁷⁵ This report dictates that 'the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers' (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p. 16).

peers and provide feedback to improve their pedagogical practices in classrooms. Finally, the programme *Ser Pilo Paga* launched in 2014 works as ‘a publicly funded financial aid program that covers the full tuition cost of attending a four- or five-year undergraduate, degree-awarding program at any top-quality University in Colombia’ (Londoño, Rodríguez, & Sánchez, 2017, p. 2). Recipients of this benefit should belong to poor households and must score in the 90th percentile of the Saber 11 (national standardised) exams.

To conclude this section of the thesis, it is worth mentioning that the reforms of the 2000s have been far from smooth. As a matter of fact, according to Grindle (2004), the nature of education reform in Latin America in recent decades has been quite the opposite: complex, unpredictable and has faced the vested interests of many actors to resist further change. Part of that complexity comes reflected in the misunderstandings about the meaning of the process itself. While for Faguet & Sánchez (2014), for example, the amendments to Law 715 of 2001 mean moving forward to a ‘higher efficiency of public expenditure’ (p. 246), for Rodríguez (2015), former President of the National Federation of Educators, they represented the beginning of a counter-reform. In his view, the process of change that was initiated with Law 115 lost vigour and education entered a period of little change, characterised by a policy emphasis on access, the improvement of the management of the sector, and the upgrading of education quality, the latter centred on the practice of evaluation. Novelli (2010) criticises (at least parts of) the process, by reflecting on the possible contradiction inherent to the new regulation in shaping a conflictive identity of teachers. In his words:

This contradictory role of teachers is reflected in ongoing debates over teachers being seen (both by themselves and others) as *workers* or *professionals* (...). As professionals, tasked with socialising the next generation, it has been argued that they occupy a privileged position within society. However, as civil servants and workers they are often faced with low status and low financial compensation, which forces them to act collectively to defend their interests, and in doing so this often leads them into confrontation with the state (Novelli, 2010, p. 278. *Original emphasis*).

For recent commentators, as for instance one former Ministry of the government, teachers’ unions should be held responsible for the multiple delays to today’s education system in the country⁷⁶. The World Bank seems to endorse that argument. According to that institution ‘[the] deepest challenge in raising teacher quality is not fiscal or technical, but political because teachers’ unions in every country in Latin America are large and politically active stakeholders’ (Bruns & Luque, 2014, p. 3). At the same time, however, the violence against teachers in the country in recent years is not negligible. Between 1991 and 2008 808 educators were murdered, 2015 received death threats, 161 suffered from arbitrary retentions, 59 disappeared in unknown circumstances, and more than 1000 were victims of forced displacements (Novelli, 2010). Gindin’s (2011) numbers report 2515 deaths of union members between 1996 and 2006, of

⁷⁶ See <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-13793015>

which 30% were teachers. All these facts add to the complexities of the education dynamics experienced in the last three decades in Colombia. And yet (or, perhaps, because), as the Think Tank *Foundation for Higher Education and Development (Fedesarrollo)* writes in a recent report, while there has been important progress in the sector, the existent legislation is out-dated vis-à-vis the new challenges in education policy. In the view of its authors, ‘the current discussion focuses on improving the quality [of education] as measured by the results of Saber and Pisa tests (...). In the current situation, the objectives of Law 715 are not coincident with those of the education sector’ (Villar, et al., 2016, p. 155. *Translated quotation*).

5.3. Towards a recent history of education in the Department of Atlántico

The Department of Atlántico makes up part of the Caribbean region in Northern Colombia, one of the most economically disadvantaged regions in the country (Bonet & Meisel, 2009; Parada, 2013), and culturally distant from Bogotá. In the account of two prominent historians, ‘[the] Caribbean zone developed quite [distinct] characteristics from those of the more isolated interior. Its population has identified with the life and culture of the Caribbean, in contrast with the majority of the population in the more insulated Andean interior’ (Palacios & Safford, 2002, p. 3). According to sociological work, the identity of the coastal inhabitants of (*El costeño*) emanates feelings of frustration and cultural detachment from national economic and political dynamics (Lastra, 2008). The *costeño*, as portrayed by Correa de Andreis’ (2016a), expresses such attitudes in their daily life by embracing *slackness*⁷⁷ as a survival tactic, a self-defences mechanism. Parada’s (2013) comparative work on Colombian regions shows that the municipalities on Caribbean coast have weak political and social institutions. In that context, it is possible to hypothesise about the historical lack of interest by regional elites to consolidate an education project - in line with Soifer’s (2015) argument for Colombia as a whole. As a matter of fact, according to Henríquez (2013):

the Caribbean region has made little progress towards the creation of programs that strengthen both the training of agents and the proper formulation and implementation of public policies in education from each [of its] territorial [entities], which aggravates the situation as the population is not being sufficiently trained to generate a critical mass to deal with [their] problems and needs (pp. 239-241. *Translated quotation*)

All these general insights from history serve as context to the reading of primary sources to reconstruct recent educational events in the Department of Atlántico. For Bell & García (1999) and Fals-Borda & Borja (1999), the decentralisation of the region has not followed the same trajectory as the experienced in other parts of the country. This section of the document splits

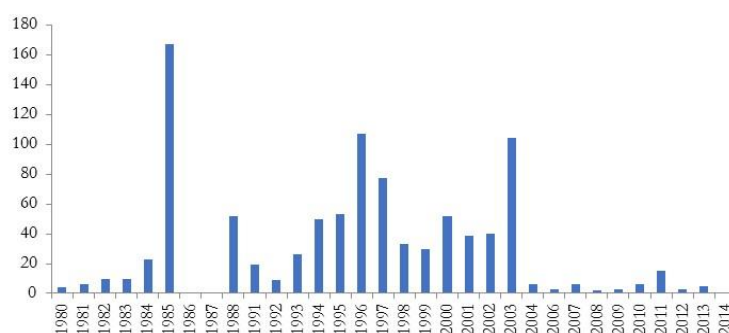
⁷⁷ It is quite common to find opinions from inhabitants from the centre of Colombia referring to the slackness of the people from the Caribbean Coast. All types of social imaginaries persist in society according to which *costeños* are lazy, less productive, etc. It is to such an image that Correa de Andreis replies by introducing sociological concepts to understand such phenomena.

in two. The first part provides an overview of the methods used to revise data in the archives of the Department of Atlántico's Chamber of Deputies for the period 1980-2014. That time span responds to the availability of data and the research interest to study recent education dynamics in the country, as experienced during the era of decentralisation. The second part of the section presents the main findings of the inquiry as a narrative of the recent history of education policies in the region.

5.3.1. *Methods for collecting and analysing primary sources*

The primary source for the analysis of this section of the Chapter is a historical archive of the ordinances produced by the Assembly of Deputies of the Department of Atlántico. As mentioned above, this institution represents the region's highest level of (political) deliberation, and hence its ordinances reflect the priorities pertaining to local educational policies. The person responsible for the collection process of this archive is a historian from the University of Atlántico (in the city of Barranquilla).

Figure 13. Number of Ordinances retrieved by year



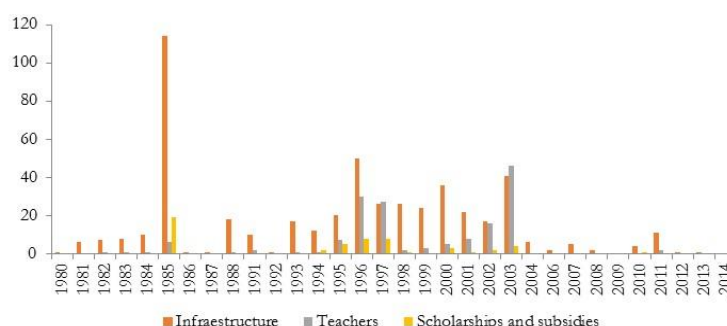
Source: Author's calculation with data from Atlántico's Chamber of Deputies.

Ordinances are article-based legal documents and are archived on printed paper (except for those produced between 2011 and 2014, which are available online). Each ordinance is around ten pages long, a size that varies depending on the topic they each deal with (for example, budgetary ordinances tend to be longer). In some cases, ordinances have appendices including historical background, information on their regulatory framework, and copies of earlier discussion drafts. Figure 13 summarises the number of ordinances retrieved by year, with a total of 936. The main researcher had preparatory sessions with the historian to plan the data collection process, fixing some general criteria for the exercise. With knowledge of the sector in mind, the historian was asked to identify ordinances based on the use of a series of words or expressions relevant to the topic.

Once the first phase of revision had finished, the research team met to discuss how to store the information and on how to categorise it. The whole package of ordinances was photographed (except for the electronic archives for 2011-2014) and organised by month and year of origin in an electronic file. The team made several attempts to organise the information

in an excel matrix, according to some general categories. That exercises soon proved to be futile, given the different formats of the ordinances throughout the years. The lack of organisation of many sections of the original file (in the archive) made such an endeavour difficult. Figure 14 represents one of the best outcomes of this exercise, by showing a (very) general overview of the type of content found. The sketch should not be taken as a precise year to year picture of education priorities, but rather as a trend unveiling how investment in educational infrastructure is a dominant item observed in across time.

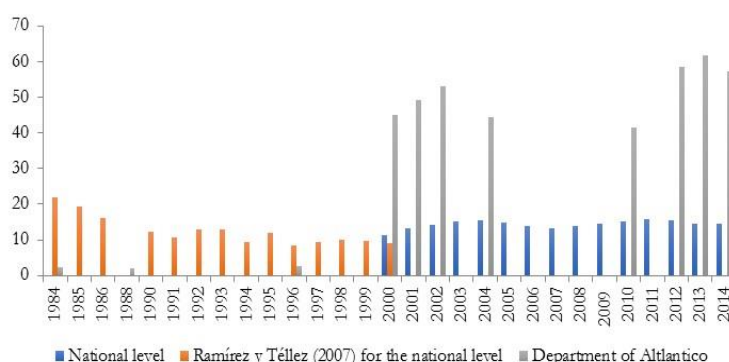
Figure 14. Number of Ordinances retrieved by year and by type of referred item



Source: Author's calculation with data from Atlánticos Chamber of Deputies.

Figure 15 presents another attempt to synthesise retrieved data systematically. Ordinances with financial data for the Department of Altántico were only available for some years, as shown in the graph. To have some comparative reference, researchers collected secondary data from the Ministry of Finance regarding the same indicator (budget in education/total budget) computed at the national level. Ramírez & Téllez's (2007) original data (requested by the author) helped to extend the national trend back to 1984. A similar caveat applies as in the latter case when reading this information. This data seems to cohere with the general logic of decentralisation (formalised around 1993-1994), and, particularly, the modernisation phase when reforms gave birth to the SGP (2000-2002). That is to say, while the nation has invested a similar number of resources in the sector over the last decades, the increase in the educational budget at the municipal level responds (at least partially) to the fact that money transfers to regions are conditioned by mandatory expenses to fund the public education service.

Figure 15. % of the total educational budget over the total investment budget



Source: Author's calculation with data from Atlánticos Chamber of Deputies, The Ministry of Finance of Colombia and Ramírez & Téllez's (2007) original data set

According to Mutch (2014), researchers can learn much from the content of the information of an archive, but also from the way it is organised and conserved. In his words 'we attend both the content and form of the records that survived' (p. 229). In a second visit to the archive, the research team requested information about missing data (missing documents, or missing parts of already retrieved ordinances) but the archive's administrator had little knowledge about the reasons for the missing information. Such situations represent a finding regarding the importance that the Assembly gives to its historical records. The rest of this section proceeds to present a narrative of the educational events observed over time. In this descriptive stage of the research, the information is organised by decades (1980s, 1990s and 2000s) and not necessarily along the same time spans as the National Narrative. Part III of this document provides the theoretical meaning to these events, by linking them to the different moments of the morphogenetic/morphostatic cycle in Archer's MGA.

5.3.2. *Content analysis of ordinances*⁷⁸

1980s

The first reference to this period is ordinance 8 from November 1980. This document gives birth to the *Educational Districts* and *School Cores* (*Núcleos escolares*) to comply with the requirement for funding of the *Educational Map Program*. Ordinance 11 from December of that same year creates the Special Fund for the Construction and Adaptation of Schools in the Department and in its first article it grants the Department with administrative autonomy, a patrimony and legal constitution. The Governor of the Department is appointed to regulate the operation of the Fund, which includes the selection of administrative staff and the definition of their roles and responsibilities.

⁷⁸ It is relevant to inform the reader that the content of this section intends to be descriptive of the raw material retrieved during the visits to the archive. Subsequent sections of the thesis focus on the analysis of the patterns that emerge from this first reading.

Infrastructural investment in education in the Department had a notable impetus since 1981. For instance, ordinance 13 allocated funds to an *Experimental Institute* and to the opening of educational institutions such as the *Colegio Cooperativo Nocturno Veinte de Julio*, *Colegio Bachillerato la Misericordia in Soledad* and authorises the construction of the Popular Education Center located in the neighbourhood *El Pueblo of Barranquilla*. Ordinance 15 from 1984 orders the delivery of budgetary items owned by the state (of 35.9 million Colombian pesos⁷⁹), and a further addition of 9.6 million pesos to the *Escuelas Gratuitas de San Roque*. The trend in spending of this type shows a peak (regarding items mentioned in the regulations) in 1985 (Graph 2) and coincides with initiatives towards decentralisation materialised since Law 4 from 1983.

The 1980s also identified initiatives aimed at defining competencies and responsibilities for actors in the education sector. Ordinance 19 from 1983 confers on the Atlántico's association of educators (ADEA) the power to administrate the Magisterium's⁸⁰ Housing Fund. The documents show that an upper limit of 2.8 million pesos was set for executable projects without needing prior participation of the Assembly, but the ADEA could not be autonomously modify the operating status. In the second half of the decade, the Assembly focused its legislative activities on issues related to resource management and the delineation of educational plans and programmes. Within the context of the 1986 institutional changes vis-à-vis the eligibility of regional political leaders, ordinance 1 of that year assigned administrative autonomy to the heads of territorial entities, empowering the Governor of Atlántico to carry out reforms in the administrative boards of decentralised entities, except for the Universidad del Atlántico.

Although this normative outline also allows a glimpse into the generation of some demand-driven incentives – such as the delivery of the *Julio Enrique Blanco de la Rosa* prize to students who show outstanding performance in national exams (ordinance 23 of 1988), the general emphasis of this period was the creation of new educational institutions. It is hence relevant to mention the restructuring of the Ministry of Education through Law 24 in 1988 and the issuance of Law 29 in 1989 that granted powers to local Mayors to make changes in the nomination and administration of the teaching plans (Bell & García, 1999).

1990s

Decree 1246 from 1990 splits the administrative and financial obligations of the National Education System between local authorities and the central state, pushing the Department of Atlántico to make greater fiscal efforts (Bell & García, 1999). In this context, legislative acts in the early 1990s addressed regional financial needs. Ordinances 16 from 1993 and 40 from 1993, for example, authorised the Governor to sign an agreement with the Ministry of Education for the co-financing of new teaching positions in secondary education. The legislation granted power to the Governorship to give loans to that end.

In the first years of this decade, the Assembly also legislated to give institutional strength to one of the main public universities in the region. For example, ordinance 10 from 1992 reinforced the academic training programmes of the University del Atlántico (based in the city

⁷⁹ All monetary figures in this section are 2016 prices.

⁸⁰ This is an expression to refer to the guild of teachers.

of Barranquilla) and makes the teaching of postgraduate programmes available in some municipalities of the Department. It is important to point out that ordinance 20 from 1992 granted this University the status of a consultative body for the Assembly for *matters of public interest*. While the researchers did not find further justification for such designation (not, at least, in the physical documents available in the archive), one can infer that this institution started to have a decisive role in education policy discussions in the region⁸¹.

Another focus of the legislation in this period was the expansion of the supply of public education. Ordinance 16 from 1992 authorised the operation of new institutions up to the ninth-grade level and formally recognised the 347 official schools registered in the Department with the Department of Education at that time. The same document empowered municipal councils to provide legal status to such schools, to then be approved by the Governor. The new schools were co-financed by each municipality in partnership with the Department and the state in line with the National and Local Educational Development Plans. The management of the school funds remained in the hands of the *Funds of Promotion of the Teaching Services*. The distribution of resources, according to the legislation, had the following order of priorities: 1) the official schools in the rural areas of the Department, 2) the official schools in the urban-marginalised area of Barranquilla and 3) the remaining public schools in Atlántico municipalities.

Law 60 from 1993 formally redistributes budgetary items at the national level. That same year, the Assembly authorised the Governor to sign agreements with the MEN to co-finance new teaching posts in secondary education (ordinance 40). The General Education Law of 1994 legislates explicitly about the new decentralised structure of education in the country, laying down organic rules to further develop the principles of Law 60. Along these lines, the first ordinance issued in 1995 created the *Departmental Council of Planning* to act as a consultative body to the Departmental Development Plan. Article 11 of Law 60 also introduced criteria for the distribution of resources from the Fiscal Account, which in the case of education, established as one of its principles the pursuit of administrative efficiency. Under such a setting, one can read ordinance 17 from 1994 that gives facilities to the Governor to create *special incentives to top performers in national exams*, as an attempt to strengthen efficiency indicators in the Department.

The remaining ordinances from this decade continued to strengthen the supply of educational services. For instance, ordinance 64 from 1996 empowered the Governor to administer a food assistance programme and to build and equip canteens in public schools. Ordinance 28 from 1998 authorised the distribution of new loans worth 1,789 million pesos to equip and refurbish schools, and ordinance 41 from 1999 authorised a 24,000 million pesos loan from the state to fund the Department's teaching body. In 1997, ordinance 14 assigned land to the University of Atlántico, the Assembly's consulting body.

⁸¹ In the section of motives in the ordinance, the document makes reference to article 300 of the Colombian Constitution. This article stated, before its modification by the legislative act 1 in 1996, that it was a role of the departmental assemblies to legislate on principles supporting economic planning for the development of the regions.

2000s

In the first ordinance of the 2000s (ordinance 19), the Assembly authorised a new loan of 48,539 million pesos to continue funding teachers' wages. Still, under the regime of Law 60, ordinance 24 continued to organise the Departmental Planning Council and ordinance 28 modified ordinance 45 from 1996 to reorganise financial elements of the Fiscal Account. As Figure 11 shows, the following years see a high level of activity in the educational legislative agenda of the Assembly, before a sudden decline in 2003. Such a shift coheres with the re-centralising trend unleashed by the publication of Law 715 in 2001.

The first ordinance of 2001 authorised the Governor to sign agreements with the Ministry of Education to execute the *New School System: Transformation of Management and Participation in Education* programme. Ordinance 22 established the teaching of *Community Education* to individuals to become agents in the development of the community to which they belong. The Assembly ordered the incorporation of such an initiative in the *Institutional Educational Projects (PEI)*, but safeguarding the principle of autonomy of schools. This is the first ordinance that makes explicit reference to a pedagogical discussion and the building of schools' curricula to respond to contextual needs (i.e. maths lessons should make explicit reference to the region's economy, and art lessons should focus on strengthening the cultural values of each subregion). The legal document orders the creation of a pedagogical commission and gives resources to the Governor to create incentives to reward institutions according to indicators that measure the impact of these study plans.

In 2002, ordinance 6 authorised an amendment of the stamp⁸² to finance health, education and sports infrastructure and ordinance 29 from 2003 authorised the Governor to sign an agreement with *Colombia's National Learning Service SENA* for the provision of vocational training in the municipalities of Atlántico. In 2006, ordinance 8 authorised agreements with the Colombian *Family Welfare Institute (ICBF)* and the municipalities of the Department for the implementation of school restaurant programmes. Ordinances 9 and 13 from the same year authorised inter-administrative agreements for the provision of information and communication technology in public schools. Ordinance 7 from 2007 and 10 from 2008 authorised the Governor to open a public call for 5,027 million pesos for the provision of surveillance services and assign another 5.336 million pesos to hiring cleaning services at schools. Ordinance 10 from 2007 added 22.266 million pesos more to fund complementary educational services in the region.

The last set of legal documents produced by the Assembly of Deputies focusses on organising the curriculum and the governance in schools and local communities. For example, ordinance 34 from 2008 assigned 50% of the appropriations from the Atlantic Digital Communications Fund to the *Compromise for a Bilingual Atlántico* programme. Ordinance 160 from 2012 sought to institutionalise the Educational Departmental Carnival⁸³. Ordinance 191 from 2013 created governance (control) institutions in schools and ordinance 213 from 2014 created a biannual

⁸² Stamps to fund public education act as indirect taxes that the government charges to institutions and firms that provide services to public universities.

⁸³ Once a year, the city of Barranquilla celebrates one of the most famous carnivals in the world. The municipalities of the Department of Atlántico organise their own celebration of the carnival. The carnival is hence an icon for the inhabitants of this region of the country.

prize for local public servants (*Communities that learn*) to encourage good management practices in education in municipalities. However, legislative efforts in these last years continued to seek additional funding to provide cleaning services (ordinances 49 from 2009 and 198 from 2003), the endowment of restaurants (ordinance 50 from 2009), the building of schools, and the purchasing of learning materials (ordinances 106 from 2010 and 217 from 2014).

5.4. A fragmented decentralisation: insights from interviews with key informants⁸⁴

The last section of this Chapter makes use of interview data from the author's conversations with public servants at the national and sub-regional levels, teachers' associations, and scholars to elucidate further aspects of the process of decentralisation of education in the Department of Atlántico. The interviews listed in Table 8 took place between August 2014 and July 2015 and served to inform the different stages of the research project. The collection of archival data from the previous section took place in parallel to these interviews, hence the interviews do not refer directly to the findings that emerged from the historical inquiry. While this circumstance limit quite importantly the possibility of triangulating both data sets, the opinions of experts on the matter do provide relevant elements to help researchers build interpretations about the current state of decentralisation of education in the region.

Table 8. List of interviews

Role/position	Institution	Level of government
Directive	Ministry of Education	National
Government's Official	The Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education	
Directive	Colombian Federation of Educators (FECODE)	
Member	Colombian Federation of Educators (FECODE)	
Directive	Atlántico's Secretariat of Education	Departmental
Government Official	Atlántico's Secretariat of Education	
Government Official	Atlántico's Secretariat of Education	
Government Official	Atlántico's Secretariat of Education	
Government Official	Atlántico's Secretariat of Education	
School Supervisor	Atlántico's Secretariat of Education	
School Supervisor	Atlántico's Secretariat of Education	
Scholar/Administrative	Private University	
Scholar/Administrative	Public University	
Researcher	Private University	
Researcher	Private University	
Researcher	Private University	
Researcher	Private University	

⁸⁴ This section of the chapter includes material published in the Colombian indexed (in the top category of the country's indexation system) journal *Papel Político*.

Role/position	Institution	Level of government
Researcher	Public University	
ADEA's Executive	Departmental Association of Educators from Atlántico (ADEA)	
ADEA's Executive	Atlántico's association of educators (ADEA)	
ADEA's Executive	Atlántico's association of educators (ADEA)	
Directive	Atlántico's association of educators (ADEA)	
Nucleus director*	Atlántico's Secretariat of Education	Municipal
Nucleus director	Atlántico's Secretariat of Education	
Government Official	Local government	
School director	Primary and Secondary School	
School director	Primary and Secondary School	
School director	Primary and Secondary School	

*Note: A nucleus director is a representative of the Department's Secretary of Education in each municipality

The rest of the section is split into the discussion of three pre-selected topics, as they reflect big themes in the educational sector, and reflect strengths/weaknesses of the decentralisation of education. These are i) the strengthening of local capacities to administer educational services, ii) the autonomy of schools to design study plans and iii) the accountability of regional institutions about the quality of education. The analysis of each topic includes the nuanced visions of the various education actors to elucidate different interpretations about educational events. Before analysing the findings from this section and the previous one conjointly, the text sums up the position of experts in the different aspects of the debate.

5.4.1. *Strengthening local educational capacities*

As discussed above, one of the major policy focusses after the publication of Law 715 in 2001 consisted of the modernisation of local institutions to administer educational services. Local institutions under the regime of Law 115 from 1994 proved themselves to be exceptionally inefficient in allocating educational resources to foster education projects (Iregui, Melo, & Ramos, 2006). The restructuration process of the Regional Secretariats of Education entailed various elements, such as systemising administrative information (i.e. about teaching bodies) and the computation of indicators to measure the quality of the service. The Governor's educational representatives also had the task of guiding schools in the building of their institutional plans (PEIs⁸⁵), without disregarding the principle of the school's autonomy as established in Law 115 in 1994. However, according to a conversation with school supervisors⁸⁶:

⁸⁵ The acronym PEI, in Spanish, stands for Institutional Educational Plan. This document contains principles and the actions that each institution establishes to guide their activities in line with the National and Local Education policy.

⁸⁶ According to Decree 907 from 1996, school supervisors are public servants working for the Secretariat of Education whose role is to support deans and teachers in the fulfilment of their duties within national and regional education policies. Some of the school supervisors that participated in a focus group have been visiting schools in the region for at least 20 years.

There is an important finding regarding the reorganisation of the personal plans and the consolidation of school's autonomy in the building of their PEIs. The process took place in a context where teachers and school directors were not prepared or updated in matters of [school's] management nor in matters of pedagogical reinforcement, so institutions fell into many improvisations when building study plans

For researchers working in the region, these weaknesses persist today, as the Secretary of Education of Altántico has failed to build proper monitoring systems that meet certain quality standards in order to ensure the efficient use of resources. As one scholar from the region declared:

In another study we made we found the information reported by educational institutions to the Secretariat [of Education] and then to the National Education System had an interesting number of mistakes (...) that end up affecting the resources of the educational institutions. (...) When the Ministry of Education analyses the data sets and starts finding "ghost" students (...) it subtracts resources from the transfers to the Secretariat and that is when we could question that strengthening process (...). The Secretariats have to be creative to manage the resources, starting from the fact that they already have debts because of the cuts in resources.

According to officials from the different levels of government, this might be a reflection of the misunderstanding in the roles and responsibilities split between the MEN and the Secretariat of Education about decisions concerning the use of resources. For school supervisors, one problem is the lack of continuity of major policies at the national level, a declaration that provides insights into dependence of local education policies vis-à-vis national programmes and initiatives:

Policies are very nice and look sharp when they leave the national level, but when they start descending to the regional, departmental and local level they become dark [or messy] and weak. One says, of course, the presentation of the Ministry is nice, but when you start observing what happens here the story is different. There is something even more curious and that is that they are affected by changes in who is the President of the Republic or each time there is a transition of Governor or Mayor.

At the national level, for representatives of the MEN, the problem is the lack of initiative at the local level to execute resources. The legislation, for them, is clear in the sense that Departments have autonomy to make policy decisions to solve local needs. As one major official of that central institution argues:

I believe that there is nothing that goes more against decentralisation than thinking that the lack of initiative of some Secretariats is because of faults committed by the central entity and that is the kind of thinking that reflects the problems of decentralisation. [To suggest] that Secretariat X is failing in its tasks is because the MEN is not supporting it to do things well [is](...) harmful to the system, and it has been happening. We have talked about it with

Secretariats and Quality leaders, and day to day one feels like that. They ask “tell me what to” and not the opposite, “you tell us what your plans are”.

The view of members of Atlántico’s association of educators (ADEA) is similar to the one of the Secretariat. For them, the MEN imposes standards (i.e. the achievement of certain goals) that hardly correspond with the needs of the regions. They distance themselves from the Departmental Government in the sense that they would like to have a bigger role in policy discussions, to which they could add many insights given their extensive experience and knowledge of pedagogics and the functioning of schools. In that regard, their position seems to be closer to the MEN’s, as they claim the need to build their own policy initiatives. Citing an ADEA’s directive member:

We are telling the Minister that she is talking with everyone but us, she does not listen to us (...). We travel to all Municipalities and Departments, and they call us [from schools] to go and see what is happening there (...). The government wants a standardised programme for everyone, that people in [the Department of] Chocó learn the same things as people here [in Atlántico], and that the student from here learns the same as the one in Amazonas, where we have totally different customs, ideologies, economies (...). That is [the reason] why we have presented the PEPA⁸⁷ proposal; we believe that we are left behind.

Summing up, despite nuances in views, all actors agree in questioning the degree of modernisation of local capacities to administer education projects according to contextual needs. As such, as the initiative to modernise the education sector started at least one decade ago (from the date of these interviews), such declarations provide at least indicative evidence of the failure of the premises of the public-choice model guiding decentralisation in education in Colombia. According to that rationale, the strengthening of local capacities should close the gaps in governance between national policies and local needs.

5.4.2. *The autonomy of schools in defying their study plans*

Evaluation practices in the country have unleashed controversies between national and subnational actors concerning the use to indicators such as exam results. Law 115 from 1994 and article 23 of the General Education Law, grant schools certain autonomy to define study plans (up to 20% of the whole plan). Article 77 of the same law specifies, however, that schools have complete freedom to define pedagogical matters, such as teaching methods and the implementation of activities at schools. One relevant discussion is, hence, the extent to which the use of national exams, as standards (often conflated with the notion of quality of education) clash, or not, with the possibility of school directors and teachers to make pedagogical decisions autonomously.

⁸⁷ PEPA stands for the Alternative Pedagogical Education Project. According to FECODE, this project better integrates the participation of everyone in the building of public policies for education in the territory.

For the Colombian Institute for Educational Evaluation (ICFES), the matter is clear. There is no contradiction between both goals (evaluation and protecting the autonomy of schools) because schools have no formal obligations to adapt their study plans to the assessment goals of national exams (*Prueba Saber 11*):

Here in the ICFES we do not believe that the indicator of the quality of education is the exam. This is only one indicator, among many others (...) To define quality in education is a complex matter, as it depends on where you stand; that is to say, if you go to a school with high-income students you will find one definition of what is quality for that institution, but if you go to a school where the kids arrive [in class] with solely [a cup of] agua de panela⁸⁸ in their bellies, the expectations about education might differ.

This same government official then adds the following statement:

The indicator that people are using are the grades [in exams], and that is something that here in the ICFES has never [been] said, [that] it is the indicator of quality

ICFES is emphatic in its aim of publishing aggregate results of *Pruebas Saber 11* per school to create a comparative parameter to encourage the self-evaluation of schools. In doing so, they respect the autonomy of schools. And, at least partially, that is the same interpretation of members of the Secretariat of Education of Altántico. According to one of its officials:

They have been clear, at least the people from ICFES, in telling us that [this] is an evaluation of only one part of the whole educational process (...). For example the competencies in mathematics, some others in language, but not (...) the whole process [as this] entails also the part on coexistence on how kids relate to each other and how students respond to social and (...) cultural aspects

Nonetheless, the same official argues that such is not the message received by schools and directors. In reality, as she points out:

When we go to schools to talk about quality (...) and the MEN goes to assess quality in education, we do it a lot from the Saber exams

In a conversation with a directive official from the MEN, it is clear that this last narrative coheres with the central government's opinion of those exams. As the official expressed, these indicators should serve as a way of focalising programmes and resources to increase the quality of education. The following excerpt stipulates that vision:

⁸⁸ This is a hot beverage made from sugar cane derivatives. Culturally, in Colombia, *agua de panela* is associated with a typical product consumed by low income families.

Probably scholars do not see it, but there is a perverse incentive when the SGP is distributed taking into account enrollment indicators, and not quality indicators (...). This is a system historically conceived in terms of inputs and when you go to regions they say “[the problem] is that I don’t receive anything, we are lacking [resources]”, that is to say, we never think in terms of results (...). We never talk in terms of how much should we demand of them [schools]. (...) It would be very nice if you study that, how has investment increased in education, and how, despite that, quality is stagnated.

Teachers’ associations are insistent in expressing their discontent about the notion of productivity immanent in Saber exams. For example, FECODE insists that education responds to a market-based logic and members of ADEA argue that the MEN makes use of those mechanisms to set barriers to improving their pay scale. When the researcher asked members of this last organisation about the meaning of Saber exams, one of them said:

Simple. It serves to determine which teachers are worthy and which teachers are not. They are simply measures to sort out which teachers can have an increase in their wage and which teachers cannot.

Within such a controversy, the Secretariat of Education asserts that schools receive mixed messages on how to exercise their autonomy. Schools end up adapting their study plans to the content of Saber exams. It is a common practice, at least in the case of the schools visited, for senior students to spend most of their time preparing for national exams. Grindle (2004) reports the same pattern happening in other Latin American countries. As one school rector told the research team, improving test scores is one major element in the school’s struggle to access resources from the local government:

Because one cannot make use of the educational service [the SGP] funds to pay for Icfes exams, the mayor provides that, but the Mayor dithers (...). We had already lost half a year (...) institutions must ensure that the student, from primary to grade 11 [the senior year] has an evaluation that coheres with the contents of Icfes

One early conclusion of this section is that the autonomy of schools, even in the reduced margin stipulated by law, seems to be affected by the existence of standards and their influence on their study plans. According to some actors, this indicates a tacit contradiction between the narratives at the central level and the way these messages arrive at schools. This situation contradicts the view on the importance of enabling bottom-up mechanisms of education policy planning, so is responsive to contextual needs and realities.

5.4.3. Accountability in the use of resources for the quality of education

Articles 15, 16 and 17 of Law 715 from 2001 sanctions the the transfer of resources for the quality of education directly to Mayors. While city Mayors are free to make use of these resources

to promote the quality of education in municipalities, the law establishes limits on their use, with a focus on items such as the maintenance of schools' infrastructure, monitoring activities, and the strengthening of information systems. These quality resources should not cover personnel expenses, such as the payment of teachers. Computations by Villar et al. (2016) reveal that this item in the education budget is equivalent to around 7% of SGP.

The Law sets a mandate for Mayors to organise Education Quality Committees, made up of members of the local government and school representatives, to define how to use these quality resources. The first challenge is hence to ensure that such a committee exists and is operational. However, according to an official from the Secretariat of Education of Atlántico:

If a Quality Committee is not working, we must notify the regional comptrollers [the fiscal authority] and the attorney's [the disciplinary body for public servants] regional offices for them to follow up on the process. We made the request to the Mayor, but only [these institutions] are in a position to sanction him (...) we have not gone into that process [a fiscal or disciplinary process] because it takes more time than working on the issue of quality

School directors agree that it is hard to make Majors accountable for the use of the education quality resources. For the following director, this situation threatens the possibility of engaging the community in relevant policy planning processes:

No one knows what the investments and projections [in education] are (...) I feel that we go against the flow because we are pointing in one direction but we feel that the municipal administration that should be our ally is going in another.

Another director argues that the lack of control over the use of resources converges in their misuse in types of investments with little relevance to the goals of institutions. For example:

The [Mayor] does whatever he likes with that money, mainly [in] training where he always sends the same [contractor] that gives a lecture to 10 and 11 graders. That is the whole contribution that he makes to schools, and the lecture is a discourse that is already known by heart by students so they do not want to listen to it anymore.

Grindle's (2004) comparative study in education reform in Latin America conveys the message that the operation of market mechanisms in education needs more, and not less, from the state. This is a topic often trivialised by public choice approaches to education and decentralisation, as is clear from mainstream accounts of this topic. The opinions of local actors show that without the conjoint working between the education sector and other state institutions it is hard to think about successful education planning endeavours in the territory.

5.5. Conclusion

This Chapter delved into the analysis of primary and secondary data to study the formation of educational institutions in the Department of Atlántico within the logic of political and administrative decentralisation in Colombia. Findings emerge from combining historical data from the Department Archive of ordinances from the Assembly of Deputies with a reconstruction of the decentralisation process of Colombian education from the 1960s onwards. The last section of the Chapter provides insights from interviews with government officials, representatives of teachers' associations and school deans, from which one can learn about the current operationalisation of the sector in the region, and also make interpretations about the merits and weaknesses of the whole decentralisation process. This section of final remarks focuses on that last discussion.

One first important message to convey is the way in which dominant theoretical frameworks which describe decentralisation in Colombia resort in simplistic views about this complex process. The Public Choice school of thought, which seems to supply the language for policy discussions in the country, places an overwhelming emphasis on the belief that the creation of proper incentives (i.e. electoral incentives) suffices for education policies to work. However, making explicit the different drivers of the actual decentralisation forces through time unveils how misleading this simplistic logic is. When inquiring about what happened in the territory, the trajectory of the ordinances in the Department, read jointly with opinions from different actors, helps to support the hypothesis that decentralisation of education in Northern Colombia is primarily administrative (the delivery of powers to execute resources) rather than political (the distribution of decision making processes). The lack of initiative by local governments to plan education in context is visible not only in the perceptions of MEN government officials at the local level, but also in the way in which the legislative activity of the Assembly coheres quite elegantly with the national initiatives to consolidate the national education project. The panorama is even more pessimistic if one considers that while the Department of Atlántico and its municipalities did produce some legislation to meet national standards in the 2000s about study plans and national curricula, the trend regarding investment and priorities did not change much between that decade and the previous one. Today, more than two decades after Law 115 from 1994, Atlántico is still building and refurbishing schools and providing them with basic cleaning and surveillance services.

Over the decades, the discussion about the responsibilities of the actors in the sector has been inconclusive. Law 715 made progress in that regard, but still, as the views from members of the Ministry reveal, it seems that there is a lot of frustration about the expected roles that different actors should carry out. One topic that exalts here is the confusing identity of teachers as professionals, as educators, as promoters of change but also as being responsible for many of the problems of the lack of quality in primary and secondary education in the country. Discussions on the priorities of education that took place in the early 1990s, with the contesting visions of education as a right or education as an engine of the economy, seemed to set basis for this contemporary controversy. The question on the extent to which efforts towards monitoring teachers' performance will ever coincide with fostering quality in teaching and learning is still

open. The chapters exploring the experiences of schools in the region should provide more insights into this debate.

The following Chapter provides further insights to strengthen the views and interpretations of the elements discussed above. The exploration of newspaper data and the presentation on a more detailed presentation of the perceptions of school directors, some of whom have been visiting schools for more than ten years, provides unique insights into the day to day operation of education policies in the territory.

Chapter Six: Education as an arena of political contestation: some reflections using regional newspapers' analysis

6.1. Introduction

The previous Chapter explored the formation of educational structures at both the national and subnational levels. This discussion made visible the power struggles and emerging contradictions shaping current education policy practices in Colombia and the northern regions of the country. While the use of interview data helped in making some interpretations about the meanings and (possible) outcomes of education policy, the analysis in Chapter Five had a *bias* towards sources produced by formal state institutions (i.e. the Assembly). This Chapter seeks, hence, to complement such an analysis by making use of newspaper data.

According to Thomas (2009) 'news discourses work to inscribe a preferred map of social reality in which certain definitions of reality are aligned with common sense, this naturalizing a preferred range of truth claims' (p. 207). The constructivist ontology behind that argument does not entail going against the realist ontology of the dissertation. As discussed in the first part of this document, the study of multiple perceptions illustrates different layers of social strata. From such perspective, seeing newspaper data as a 'preferred map of social reality' unleashes its power to study situated power struggles in education policy as potential expressions of the operation of underlying social structures. The methodological section of this Chapter elaborates upon a data analysis strategy that makes use of dialectics (see Chapter Two) to situate the exploration of media within the context of regional and national education debates. In a nutshell, the analysis profits from insights retrieved during a workshop with school supervisors which had as its main theme the discussion about the recent story of education in the Department of Atlántico.

Several studies report the use of media as a suitable source to explore aspects of policy processes, from the descriptions of events (Mallinson, et al., 2003; Cochran, 2012) to the understanding of the way in which contesting visions and discourses shape public debates (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Thomas, 2002; Stack, 2007; Waldowa, Takayamab, & Sung, 2014; Green, 2015). According to Waldowa, Takayamab & Sung (2014):

Studying mass media discourses can provide important insights for understanding the dynamics of educational reform. (...) [T]he mass media do not just represent, but actually produce what constitutes our shared social reality, from which follows what constitutes the past and what are relevant hopes and expectations for the future. Mass media choose modes of presentation that resonate with underlying patterns of interpretation among their audience ('framing'...). Thus, the study of media discourses is a fruitful way of examining the underlying patterns of interpretation in a population (...). These patterns of interpretation are, in turn, important for how educational references to 'elsewhere' are inserted into domestic educational reform discourses, i.e. for how

‘externalization to world situations’ operates in concrete national contexts (p. 304).

As intuitive as it sounds, the ownership of media shapes the way in which events are framed and reported (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the case of Colombia, such a statement is not trivial. Regarding ownership, ‘[a]lthough the [big editorial] conglomerates have acquired stock from the newspaper enterprises, most major newspapers are still associated with the last names of a few families that have sat behind their editorial focus’ (Arango, et al., 2009, p. 72). A recent study by Cárdenas (2016) unveils critical elements that expose some possible implications of the monopolisation of mass media, in this case of television news broadcasts. A content analysis of media coverage of local elections by the two major TV channels in the country, *RCN* and *Caracol*, shows that the former tends to be more sensationalist. Owned by big economic groups, the authors conclude that the mass media in the country might be contributing to a reinforcement of a cycle of opacity in the information that limits the participation and the understanding of national and local problems among citizens.

To bring some balance to the interpretation of educational events, the current analysis consults two major regional newspapers. According to the Media Observatory of the Caribbean (Coronel, 2016), the two selected sources represent two different views of society in relation to their readers and sponsors. *El Herald*, on the one hand, has the circulation in the whole of the Caribbean region, with its main advertisers being private enterprises, the automobile, the real estate and other commercial sectors, and big supermarkets chains. *La Libertad*, on the other hand, has an important readership in the sub-regions (i.e. municipalities) and most of its readers are *common people*. Neither of these periodicals has an electronic (or online) archive with historical records of former editions (not, at least, across large time spans). As one school supervisor told the research team, *La Libertad* is one of the information sources most consulted by school teachers.

Figure 16. Frequency of news pieces about education found in two main regional newspapers

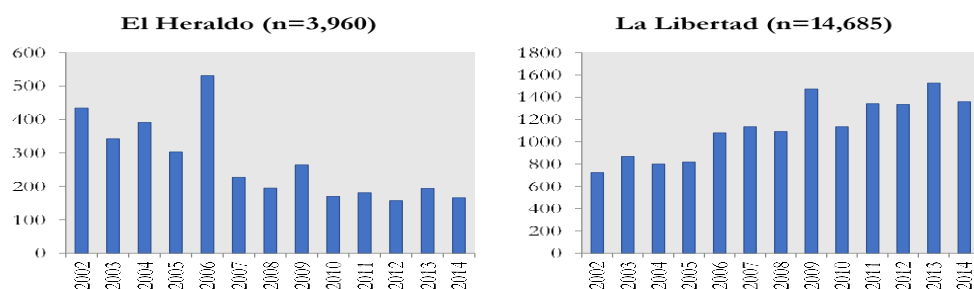
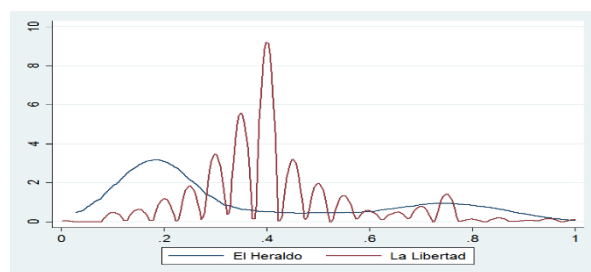


Figure 16 shows the frequency of news pieces about education found in both periodicals per year. All news pieces were photographed and stored in an electronic file. The primary sources were consulted at a Departmental Archive. Research assistants carried with them a spreadsheet

to fill in basic information about the news pieces, such as the date, the page and the section in which it appeared in the periodical. The task of the research assistants was to photograph all news pieces that contained either in their headline or sub-headline certain relevant terms predefined by the whole team during the preparatory phase of the exercise. Due to the dimension of the task (in terms of the amount of information, particularly in La Libertad), the team decided to focus on the period 2002 and 2014 (the archive consultation in the archive started in the autumn of 2014). In this way, the media coverage thus studied the period immediately after the 2001 education reform. Part III of this document argues that this year denotes the beginning of the interaction phase in the morphogenetic cycle, hence making this media inquiry relevant to the study of social interactions within contemporary educational structures in the country. The data covers only eight months of the year (from March to May, and from July to November), due to the schools' academic calendars and the celebration of the carnival at the beginning of every year⁸⁹.

Basic descriptions of the data set provide valuable insights into the dynamics of education politics in the period under study. One could wonder, for example, about the importance given to education during the observed period. Figure 17 shows the results of a priority index, which divided the page number on which each news piece was found by the total pages of each edition of both El Heraldo and La Libertad. Figure 18 presents a similar exercise by considering the number of pages in which there is at least one education-related news story in relation to the total pages in each daily edition of each newspaper. By taking into consideration the sponsors and the readership of each periodical, it is possible to argue that education is less relevant for Atlántico's entrepreneurial elites than it is to less privileged (income-wise) sectors of society (the priority index goes from 0 to 1, where 1 represents full priority). Evidence also shows that the gap in the importance devoted to education in print media between the two analysed periodicals has increased over time. For example, El Heraldo devoted around 10% of its space to education in 2004, a figure that went down to 5% by the end of the period being analysed. In the case of La Libertad, the percentages changed from around 16% in 2002-2004 to 23% in 2014.

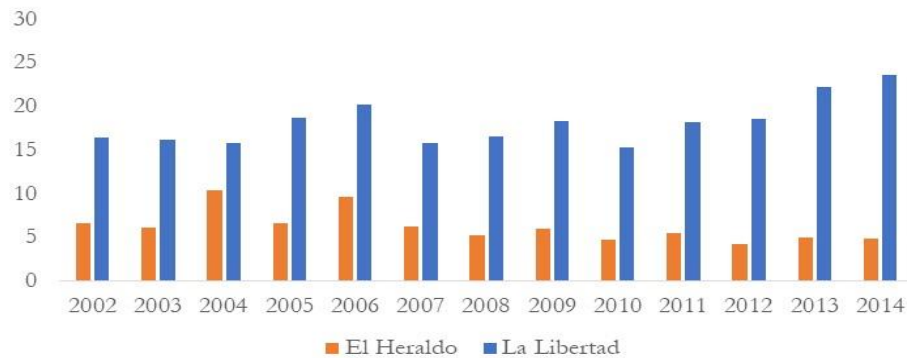
Figure 17. Computation of a priority index by newspaper



Source: Author's calculations. All differences are statistically significant according to a Mann Whitney test for nonparametric distributions.

⁸⁹ In an earlier interview with an official from Atlántico's Secretariat of Education, the interviewee recommended the team to focus on these months, assuming that these correspond to periods with more activities in the sector. Carnival usually takes place in February, but pre-carnival festivities start at the beginning of January and involve lots of extracurricular activities by public institutions.

Figure 18. % of pages devoted to education in each newspaper



Source: Author's calculations. All differences are statistically significant according to a Mann Whitney test for nonparametric distributions.

This first broad result validates many of the points emphasised in the previous Chapter of this dissertation. It particularly resonates with Soifer's (2015) assertion on the lack of initiative by Colombia's elites to pursue a national education project. Conversely, as Castelló-Climent (2008) argues, 'more equal distribution of education is what matters for democracy, that is, the implementation and sustainability of democracies need the support of the majority of the society' (p. 189). That is to say, if elites perceive education as a distributive mechanism to empower non-elites to redistribute societal resources, they might find incentives not to pursue large educational reforms. The aim of this Chapter is not only to carry out a counting exercise on the number of news pieces published each year, but also to delve into (some of)⁹⁰ the content of published information. Such an overview should provide further insights to support (or not) these first general claims.

6.2. Methodological notes

In line with the literature, the basic methodology for analysing newspaper data corresponds with the logic of qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012). According to Green (2015), '[t]his process involves discerning meaning about attitudes, symbols, cultures and institutions from which inferences are ultimately drawn' (p. 27). This latter author also clarifies the nonlinear nature of the analysis, in the sense that more than offering a literal description of the content, it seeks to elucidate possible patterns and trends beyond first time observations of data. One important challenge with the current dataset, as mentioned earlier, is that the archives are not workable *pdf* documents, but pictures. Working with electronically readable documents has the advantage of allowing the implementation of more automatated procedures (such as a word count) to navigate over hundreds of pages to extract patterns. Such an inquiry belongs to the growing field of cliometrics (Diebolt & Hauptert, 2016).

⁹⁰ It is important to clarify that the intention here is not to make a deep content analysis (or a critical discourse analysis) of media information, but rather to make use of some trends and insights to contribute to the understanding of the recent history of education policy in Atlántico. The methodological discussion of the chapter clarifies the rationale behind such an approach.

The first step in the analysis consisted of determining a sub-sample of data. Based in the mean of news pieces retrieved in both periodicals per year (175.4) and its standard deviation (43.4), the objective was to randomly select one month per year with a similar number of news pieces as other selected months. The procedure consisted of dividing the standard deviation by three ($43.4/3 = 14.5$), with the resulting number being added/subtracted to the mean (the resulting range was 189,8 - 160,91). One additional criterion, which was also considered during the data collection phase, was to leave aside opinion columns. Given that in the big sample some opinion columns were (erroneously) included, the team excluded from the selection all months that had more than two opinion columns in the dataset. The final sample (Table 9) includes 2,256 news pieces, corresponding to 12% of the collected data.

Table 9. Sub-sample size

Year	Month	Total news pieces
2002	4	162
2003	4	172
2004	5	180
2005	9	169
2006	10	163
2007	8	178
2008	11	180
2009	7	161
2010	9	182
2011	3	189
2012	10	189
2013	3	170
2014	4	161
Total		2,256

The selected sub-sample was analysed using the Nvivo software. This software enables researchers to manually add descriptors of pictures and then proceed with a word count of those descriptions. Word counts, as the term suggests, gives the frequency of all the words found in the document. One initial problem with this option was that the researcher would have a list of meaningless words or terms (i.e. and, of, in, a, about, etc.) which were useless to build categories. The researcher hence decided to include descriptive phrases for each picture, without using spaces between words. For instance, if the news piece was about a new programme for the training of teachers, the descriptor would have said something like *newprogrammetrainingteachers*. After a word count, such big terms could then be codified into nodes (The Nvivo Term for a Category or a Code) and then grouped into thematic categories (i.e. in this case, a category could be teachers' training). While one disadvantage of this strategy is that it is still time-consuming, it also obliged the researcher to read each news piece (2,256 of them) and to generate memos (or notes) with detailed reflections that emerged during the codification process.

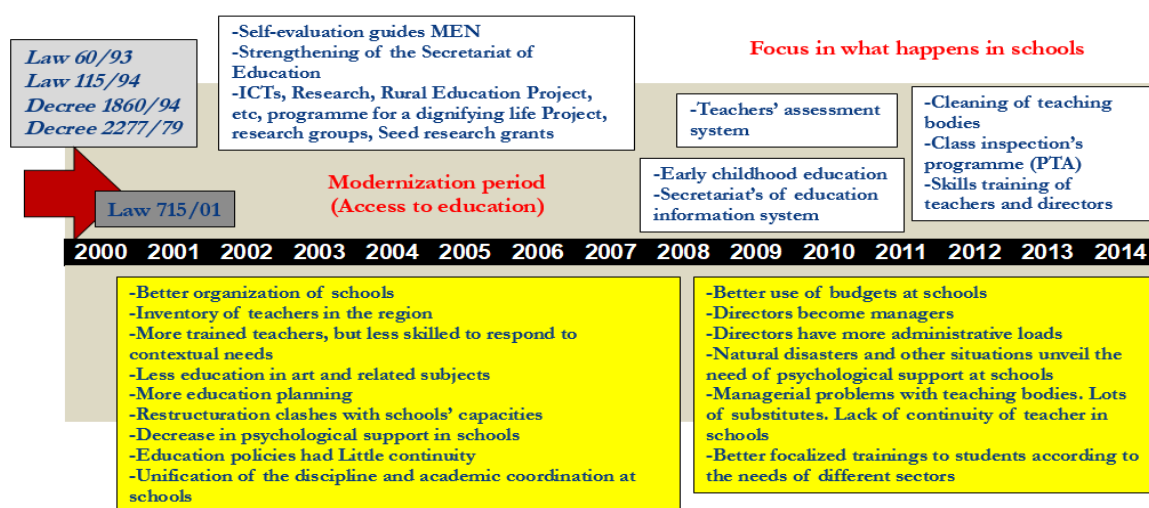
Chapter Two of this thesis introduced the use of dialectics as a way of helping the researcher to analyse information in context. In this case, the general reading of newspaper data had as its background a conversation with school supervisors during a workshop entitled *Reconstructing the*

recent history of education in the Department of Atlántico 2002-2014. The meeting made use of Participatory Action Research tools, such as the use of colour papers to identify laws, projects and events (and distinguish between them) to encourage the group of government officials to reflect on the dynamics in the educational sector throughout that period. Before proceeding with the results of the content analysis, the next section presents a summary of the workshop's main findings, which serve as a basis for the organisation, into themes, of information published in El Heraldo and La Libertad. The conversation with key informants also contributes in providing meaning to the trends and patterns identified in this last stage.

6.3. Conversing with school supervisors and laying the context for the media analysis

Figure 15 below gives a general representation of the outcomes of the workshop. School supervisors basically refer to two delimited periods to best describe education policy dynamics in the period of study. The first one starts with the reforms in the early 2000s, in particular Law 715 from 2001. Supervisors called this the *modernisation* period, basically because local governments had the task of strengthening their institutional capacities to carry out the new responsibilities given to them. As discussed in the previous Chapter, one important emphasis of the reform was financial with a focus on the more efficient use of the resources transferred from the National Government to Governorships and certified municipalities via de SGP. The supervisors saw the second phase, which took place in the second part of the 2000s, as one in which the Ministry of Education and the Secretariat of Education in Atlántico, made efforts to strengthen the managerial capacities of educational institutions. Discussions during this phase also refer to matters concerning pedagogics and the life of children at schools. It is clear that there is some overlap, but the sketch in Figure 19 paints the general trend.

Figure 19. Sketch of the results of the workshop with school supervisors



The methodology used in the workshop sought to help supervisors to be explicit in distinguishing laws from programmes and the possible results of the latter. Figure 19 respects that logic, using grey to sketch laws, white to sketch policy drivers (including projects or more general policy initiatives) and yellow to sketch possible outcomes. One can see that the only Law referred to as applying from 2001 onwards is Law 715 from 2001. That does not mean that there was not new educative legislation produced after that (the reader can refer to the previous Chapter for more details on the legislation from this period). Rather, it seeks to illustrate that the whole of the first decade (and a half) of the 21st century was devoted to the implementation of the new educational reform. Supervisors summarised the new dynamics of the sector in the following way:

We are talking about the years 2002 or 2003 after which the modernisation by the Secretariat of Education started. What is modernisation? Let's say that [it involves] tying the management system to some quality parameters so that the Secretariat of Education could manage the reorganised schools and could manage personnel plans (...). Let us say that the two basic components of modernisation are the introduction of quality indicators and the information system (...) this is the policy derived from Law 715 of secondary (...) education.

Formally speaking, supervisors mention the general intention (from the state via its institutions) to continue deepening the decentralisation process to make schools new administrative units with new roles and responsibilities in the sector. Such an endeavour granted levels of autonomy to local governments to take policy initiatives in the development of education, and link such a transformation with the eventual need to make transformations in the legislation that regulated the teaching profession at that time.

We should also (...) see the connection [of Law 715 with] Law 115 and Law 60, that gave freedom to Departments and Municipalities to have their own plans for educational development. Let's say that the level of decentralisation is lowered to the Educational Institution (...) but it must also be said that parallel to this the organisation of teachers was still ruled by Decree 2277 [from 1979]

In that context, one significant change at the beginning of the decade is represented in the publication of Decree 1278 in 2002, or the new teaching statute, and new administrative efforts to reorganise teaching personnel plans in the country. According to workshop participants, and at least for the case of the Department of Atlántico, the new policy focus involved creating an inventory that did not exist before, and encouraged a new organisation of schools that would signify a better alignment between the appointment of teachers and the needs of schools:

The Department built a real inventory of its teaching plan and of the infrastructural resources that it owned at that time. The inventory did not exist (...) Another finding [for this period] is that the Department and the municipalities began to make plans for territorial education

at the departmental level and municipal level. (...) Educational establishments present a more specific administrative and pedagogical organisation regarding management indicators [and] regarding pedagogical methodologies and is more concrete regarding a (...) more stable staff because staff is assigned directly to the institution according to a concrete [and] achievable educational proposal.

The lack of an earlier inventory, as supervisors recalled, signified an important challenge regarding the building of institutional capacities to take on the new reforms. From a strictly financial point of view, the inefficient way in which the Department attempted to adapt to the new typologies of Law 715 to reorganise the schooling system, signified a slowdown of the process, at least in the first years of the decade. As the transfer of resources from central government involved some conditionalities, like the creation of a local regulatory system to formalise the decentralisation scheme, the adjustment period entailed transitory cuts (or delays) in the delivery of the SGP resources for education and faced resistance from different social actors:

According to these typologies [of schools, of Law 715] the staff is organised. There is staff for rural educational institutions, and also these staff are organised at school level [primary and secondary] (...) All of that had to be endorsed by an ordinance. You will find them from 2004 onwards because if the Department had not organised those ordinances, the state would not have turned over the resources in the national transfer system [SGP]. That was a rather delicate time here in Atlántico and throughout the country, because it had opponents because [the new scheme] involved the relocation of teachers [and even], at a certain time, the merging of schools that were high schools but had very few students

Resistance to the reforms during the modernisation period was expressed in different ways. Exemplified by the last quote, one of these entailed the lack of preparation of schools and their managers to assume the new roles and responsibilities. As the following excerpt illustrates, supervisors considered the reforms to demand cultural transformations, which did not occur at the same pace. As a result, the operationalisation of a more managerial-led way of doing things in schools converged into lots of improvisations that did not reflect the general purpose of the new legislation:

[reforms were introduced] in a context in which teachers and school directors at that time were not sufficiently trained and updated on management and issues of pedagogical reinforcement, hence institutions made many improvisations in their study plans (...). I personally consider that when (...) the census tests [or standardised exams for 3rd, 5th and 9th graders] appeared, the institutions began to pay the cost (...) When one looked into the [so called] significant experiences, one found that they did not reflect those changes that should have [taken place] (...) because there was lots of improvisation regarding the training of teachers

Parallel to that, the new teaching statute, as previously discussed (see Chapter Five), included new rules on the selection and appointment of teachers in schools and the pay scales of educators, in line with national regulations, and the specification of performance indicators to define the permanence of teachers in service. Vis-à-vis the old scheme (Decree 2277 from 1979), this new one responded to new policy trends in the professionalisation of teaching bodies. However, as participants recalled:

[in 2003, 2004] a union resistance by the [teachers' organisation] begins to appear because in some cases they considered that acquired rights in the institutions were harmed because suddenly (...) people were relocated inconsistently (...). The Colombian Federation of Educators [FECODE] had a clear guideline in the sense that the Colombian educators should oppose the whole process of the development of Law 715 because Law 715 in macro terms implied a reduction of the nation's budget [in education] that affected the staffing plans

It is worth restating that the spirit of Law 715 was one of austerity in public expenses (see Chapter Five). As researchers from the Colombian Central Bank confirm, the deceleration of the economy in the late 1990s entailed a reduction of revenues to local governments, thus compromising the sustainability of education and health expenses. Such dynamics justified, hence, the creation of the SGP (Bonet, Pérez, & Ayala, 2014). The following two excerpts contrast two views by supervisors about the outcomes of that first year of reforms in 2001. On the one hand:

[schools] present a more specific administrative and pedagogical organisation in terms of management indicators (...) [and] pedagogical methodologies and more concrete in the sense that they have a group of people or a more stable staff because teachers are directly assigned to the institution [according to a] concrete and achievable educational proposal [or plan]

On the other hand, however:

The emphasis (...) for educational institutions and [school] directors was in terms of the number of students; for them to go and find students and according to the number of students [they] would receive money (...). That had an influence (...) on educational institutions to reform their study plans and their curricular proposals not conditional on the development of an educational proposal but responding to the profiles of the teaching plans they had.

The trend here indicates a clear subordination of educational reforms to the logic of fiscal discipline. Some examples of such a rationale emerged during the workshop, including, for example, the cutting of subjects in the study plans, some of them responding precisely to the composition of the teaching bodies at schools, and the safeguarding of teacher-student ratios as parametrised by the Ministry of Education. As the supervisors stated, some of the big losers of such cuts were subjects such as physical education and art lessons. The responsible use of resources entailed, as supervisors also recalled, further modifications in the roles of educational

actors. Two clear examples are the role of school psychologists and the merging of academic and discipline coordinators. The effects of these measures, according to workshop participants, were detrimental to pedagogical processes at schools. The following two excerpts illustrate quite clearly their opinions in this regard. In the first case:

the school advisers are the ones accompanying students in their personal and professional or academic processes. [These professionals] became teachers, meaning that they took their advisory role away. If there were educational institutions with up to six school counsellors attending to 2000 students [they] then changed them and removed them (...) this is where the crisis began with the students

In the second case:

A key point that you must take into account (...) for your research (...) is when the restructuring of staff plans in schools was made (...). Before the restructuring process, schools had disciplinary coordinators [and] (...) when [they were] doing the rationalisation of plans each school received only one coordinator who saw himself [as] a disciplinary coordinator and [as one of] academic [affairs] (...). That was detrimental in the academic management of schools and generated a strong downfall in the pedagogy.

The second phase of education policies in Figure 15 involved a transition in emphasis of the MEN's policy efforts. The sketch suggests that the transition started in around 2008. However, the first indication of that transition happened, according to the supervisors, with the introduction of technology in schools as part of a pedagogical strategy to improve the learning of students. The supervisors recalled that from 2004 onwards, the Department of Atlántico also started to install ICT rooms. The government officials link the technological initiative to the fact that in that year it became mandatory for schools to have an information system to monitor the enrollment of students. However, the effectivity in the use of ICT at schools is a controversial issue in the country. Some scholars defend the results of nationwide programmes, such as *Computers to Educate* (Rodríguez, Sánchez, & Márquez, 2011), but others argue that there is a gap between the arrival of computers in educational institutions and their actual incorporation as a pedagogical tool in classrooms (Barrera-Osorio & Linden, 2009). Interestingly, one supervisor referred to the initiative as *Computers to throw away*, to indicate that many of the devices donated to schools were simply obsolete.

As mentioned before, the whole transition period throughout the years 2004 to 2006, also reflected the shift in the public discourse about the need to transit from a policy focused upon making educational institutions accessible to new students, to a quality oriented one (see Chapter Three). For supervisors, this meant that schools had to be more active in contributing the consolidation of information systems to the local and national authorities. One specific tool for that task was the initiation of self-evaluation processes at educational institutions, with the guidance of the Ministry of Education:

[the] years 2004 and 2005 (...) are like a period of transition where the Ministry begins to draw guidelines for educational institutions on the policy of evaluation (...). The Ministry (...) trains and provides the tools to the Secretariat of Education (...) for the process of institutional self-evaluation [at schools] (...). Guide 34 of the Ministry is evidence of that transition as it starts (...) to see a school or an educational institution from the perspective of four big components - the directive, administrative, academic and pedagogical management of the educational community

Returning to Figure 15, supervisors recall that the new focus on what happens at schools sought to complement the capacity building projects of the government and schools forged in the previous years with institutions' actual educational goals rather than only financial ones. The application of guide 34 also enforced new agreements with universities to provide more formal programmes of skill formation to educators, different from the *giving a talk* approach that supervisors remember from the past. The topic of teaching excellence, as previously discussed, is a major policy focus in contemporary debates. One other major policy trend emphasised providing training to school directors and administrators, seeking to convert them into managers of their institutions. The great winners in the process, as supervisors highlighted, were these public servants, as they were recipients of new and important skills to exercise their role as the keepers of educational quality in the schools they represented. However, as supervisors mentioned, this latter result saw an increase in directors' tasks, making it difficult for them to accomplish many of their new tasks. One workshop participant talked about the way in which the law made them responsible for 18 new tasks, but that in real terms they have to fulfil around 40. That, for that supervisor, was simply too much: *'school directors cannot deal with it'*.

This whole new period included the creation of new peer classroom observation initiatives, like the All to Learn (PTA) programme, and new efforts to address early childhood programmes, all with a clear initiative at the national level. While supervisors do recognise the exitance of some local initiatives in these years - such as the *dignifying life* programme, to assist in the prevention of drug abuse and student drop outs, they also recall that many of these perished as new administrations rarely gave continuity to these types of policies. In an email in July 2017 sent by one school supervisor, perhaps the one with the most experience in the group, he confirmed that the lack of local initiative in the designing and planning of education policies responds to the still existent rationale of political centralisation in the country:

What we have been observing in the exercise of educational supervision (...) is that under the constitutional principles of the Preamble [of the constitution] and Article 67, the existing central state has formulated the entire educational policy that concerns the nature, purpose and structure of the public education service. (...) [D]espite the [existence of] principles of autonomy, participation, diversity, etc., (...) when one arrives at the context and the moment of application of the policies, the centralisation mechanisms that arise through the budget (Law 60 and Law 715) appear with administrative strength, which through their regulation create a structure of school management for the curriculum, for teachers' careers, staffing plans, physical infrastructure, which together with the existence of a centralised information system

from the MEN, limit territorial entities ability to intervene and reorient education policy with true and authentic criteria of pertinence and relevance. Consequently, the departmental Assembly is limited to issuing one or another ordinance to approve the plans (...) of the Secretariat of Education, [like the] creation of a school, budgeting some of its own resources, etc. But the legislative trajectory in fundamental aspects of the departmental educational system is poor because it assumes completely the national policy established by the MEN

Chapter Three of this document already delved into the issue of political decentralisation. The comments by supervisors in this current section (including the above quotation) cohere with many of the comments made before. For example, government of Atlántico officials recognise how hard it is for school directors and administrators to make municipal authorities accountable for the resources that the Mayor receives to foster the quality of education in educational institutions. While there is a lot of control over the use of the resources sent directly to schools to ensure access to education - the *recursos de gratuidad*⁹¹ - some school directors know very little about the use of quality resources, a fact that affects the governance of education at local levels. In the words of supervisors:

Supervisor 1: the free access to education resources is watched over so carefully the Mayor. If only you could see how attentive municipal council deputies are at the arrival [of these resources] (...). The teachers and the parents pay attention to the distribution of those resources [as well] (...) I mention the deputies because they do not do the same with quality-in-education money

Supervisor 2: Initially, [the municipal quality committees] were well received because the Mayor, the councillors [and] the director[s] participated and they organised the distribution of the money according to the [educational] institution[s]' needs. But there was a time [after that] where [the committees were] lost and now [they are] coming back

Towards the end of the workshop, participants mentioned the massive flood that affected many of the municipalities in this study in 2010. Here it is worth remembering how Figure 7 (in Chapter Two) shows evidence that there were no direct effects of this natural disaster on students' test scores in the region. However, supervisors argue that one of the outcomes of this flood was that it made visible the vulnerability created by cutting some important expenses in the psychological advice given to children. If one considers that many of the children in these regions live without their parents (many parents travel to other regions to work), one can

⁹¹ Back in Chapter One there was a mention of the quality resources, which are residuals of the SGP that are sent directly to local governments. The free-access resources (*recursos de gratuidad*) are also a residual of the SGP in education, but these are sent directly to school directors to ensure the delivery of educational services at the institution he or she leads. According to Article 19 of Decree 4807 from 2011, such resources are earmarked for such things as the hiring of school transport, the funding of extra school hours, covering students' graduation costs (i.e. certificates), and for expenses associated with activities such as grading (i.e. grading sheets).

hypothesise on the possible detrimental effects of the austerity measures of the early 2000s on problems at schools. As supervisors commented to the research team:

[F]rom those three following years [after the flood] there was an academic fall for several reasons. (...) There were psychological effects on the children (...) When one went to schools one found that children had become more aggressive or more hyperactive or depressed, and teachers as well. In the year after the flood, there were severe flu and diarrhoea epidemics that affected children (...). If the Department, when it restructured staff plans (...) had ensured there would be enough psychological advisers in the schools, the crisis would surely have been solved faster, but this crisis appeared in institutions of the south because in the south there lacked psychological advisers.

Finally, the workshop participants referred to the fact that many of the effects of the Ministry of Education's new policies would take some time to show their effects in helping schools' continued transformation. In general terms, supervisors show some optimism in this regard, as they see that, without doubt, institutions today have better-trained teachers and their activities are better organised. Nonetheless, they also suggested items for further revision, as it is not clear whether some of the policies addressing teaching excellence will contribute to, rather than hinder, the ongoing processes. For example, there is no doubt that educators today exhibit a low appropriation of their profession. Partly, they comment, this is because the strategy to increase the number of educators in schools has, since 2001, endorsed the logic of accepting professionals from different professions with a lack of pedagogic knowledge. Parallel to that, the lack of clarity about the dates and specific rules relating to teaching appointments - this process is administrated by an institution that is not part of the MEN - has also resulted in the hiring of many provisional educators who are uncertain about their permanence. As a supervisor highlighted:

it is necessary to observe that at this moment (...) there is a problem with the social recognition of the teaching profession which is often fostered by the State and by the same process of appointing teachers (...). Many people do not want to go to Normal schools or any other educational facilities. That is [because of the lack] of recognition and the [expected] earnings

6.4. The policy process: a newspaper analysis of education policy 2002-2014

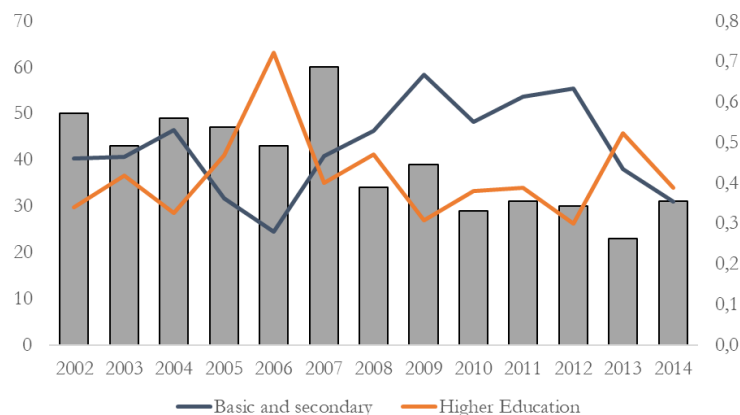
This section presents the results of the newspaper analysis. As mentioned above, the insights from the conversations with school supervisors in the last section help to provide context and meaning to some of the identified trends in the types and frequency of news pieces published in the region's two main printed periodicals. Figures 18 and 19 provide descriptive data for both Basic and Secondary Education, and Higher Education for the period under study. While the focus of this dissertation is on the former, the analysis of the ordinances unveiled a clear linkage between the types of education and the role of universities in schools' policy planning activities. For example, the University of Atlántico plays a formal role as an adviser to the Assembly of

Atlántico in educational matters. Furthermore, Higher Education institutions play an important role in the execution of ongoing education policies, such as the training of teachers and school administrators, through their supply of postgraduate education. Breaking up the news into these two categories helps, hence, in broadening the scope of the analysis.

Figures 20 and 21 include the total number of news pieces retrieved per periodical (the grey bar lines) and the distribution of types of news according to the categories Basic and Secondary Education, and Higher Education. From those basic sketches, it is possible to observe that most of the news in El Heraldo (proportionally speaking) deals with basic and secondary education, the opposite to the situation before 2007. The case is similar in La Libertad. Here it is worth mentioning that while the Department of Atlántico has no more than 20 Institutions of Higher Education (such as universities), in 2013 it reported having more than 7700 schools. Comparing both papers, it is also possible to see a declining trend in the number of news pieces reported by El Heraldo, which showed a peak in 2007. While La Libertad reported more education-related news in 2014 than at the beginning of the period (2002 and 2003), the newspaper has tended to report the same amount of news about education over time. Combining such a description with the one made when analysing Figures 22 and 23, serves as an indication that La Libertad has a clearer emphasis on education than its counterpart.

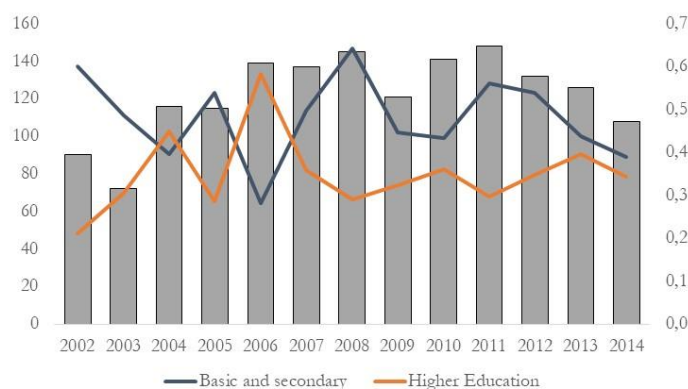
Figures 22 and 23 go into more detail about the content of each periodical. The qualitative content analysis announced in the methodological section of the Chapter resulted in 28 categories, all of which elucidate major trends, but also conflicts and contradictions among educational actors, as reported in the media. In both figures, the intensity of the colours represents the relative importance of each category in each year. The numbers inside the boxes stand for the percentage of news items in each category yearly. Generally speaking, one can observe that categories such as the announcements and delivery of infrastructure to educational institutions (EIS), non-teacher problems, and the needs of schools are the most visibly reported categories for basic and secondary education in El Heraldo. La Libertad, on the other hand, focuses much of its attention on national policies and programmes (this category is also important in El Heraldo), the accreditation of EIS, student's assessments (i.e. news about the nature and the application of national exams), and academic seminars and events. The announcements and delivery of infrastructure were also important topics in La Libertad, particularly before 2008. Interestingly, in both sources, the number of news pieces on national education policies (a category that includes news about programmes such as *Familias in Acción*) doubles the number of news stories about local educational initiatives. Such a thick indicator coheres with the discussions on decentralisation carried out so far in this document.

Figure 20. Distribution of news pieces in El Heraldo according to the type of education reported (n=519)



Source: Author's calculations

Figure 21. Distribution of news pieces in La Libertad according to the type of education reported (n=1590)



Source: Author's calculations

In the case of Higher Education, both periodicals focus much of their reporting on seminars and academic events. Here it is worth mentioning that these events correspond solely to academic discussions around academic research. Other types of meetings or gatherings (such as celebrations or anniversaries, or visits by politicians and government officials) belong to categories such as anniversaries, graduations and celebrations, and public debates. For El Heraldo, the issue of universities' debts (particularly Universidad del Atlántico) represents a focus of interest, particularly before 2008, and again, though less frequently, in 2013 and 2014. The academic courses on offer have some importance in both periodicals, but so do the issues of protests and public demonstrations, a category that, in the case of primary and secondary education, is more frequently reported in La Libertad. That last finding indicates that the spreading of educational processes in the region have, in contrast to suggestions made by mainstream research, been far from smooth (i.e. there has been an important resistance to change). Furthermore, while categories such as corruption and complaints are subtle, their

intensity in some years unveils elements of the complex interactions between educational actors in the making of education policies throughout the decade.

The triangulation of sources (Figures 22 and 23 along with the notes taken by the researcher during the detailed reading of all news pieces, and the conversations with supervisors) provides further elements to consider in the general analysis. Instead of presenting a detailed year by year analysis, it will be more profitable to discuss some basic propositions vis-à-vis the information retrieved from both periodicals.

5.5.1. *Local policies reflect national debates: where is the local education policy?*

Indeed, in both periodicals, the amount of news referring to national policies is more than double the number of local education stories. This is also the case for the accountability and public debates categories. In both periodicals, one can observe an important number of news pieces in which politicians account for or talk about the results of different policies. Sometimes politicians - particularly the first ladies of the national, departmental, or Barranquilla governments - visit schools to deliver materials and to commemorate events. These acts can hardly account for proof of effective public policy planning in the region. Most of the news about local initiatives refers to projects at schools (i.e. *water day* – a day celebrating water). An explicit mention of local discussions on curriculum planning or on the goals of education, are practically absent in the media. Some exceptions come in the guise of reports of specific events, such as the visit of international experts to talk about adequate (or pedagogical) toys for children, or the discussion lead by the MEN in 2007 to discuss pedagogical projects at Normal⁹² schools.

There is a category of notes on the progress and challenges of education, which also refers to both national and local challenges of education policy. That is a space in which newspaper editorials, for example, address pressing issues about the sector. The various references to standardised exams when discussing, for example, the lag in such indicators in the Caribbean region, or when periodicals refer to standardised as *the* desirable standard, makes clear, once again, the way national debates (i.e. exams) are dominant over local discussions about the role of education. For example, in 2005 La Libertad published a news piece in which the ICFE's executive officer for the Department of Atlántico declared she would immediately seek alignment with the Ministry's National Education Policy. In 2014, in that same periodical, an awarded educator with a prize for teaching excellence (*Premio Compartir*) reflected on the mediocre performance of the country in PISA exams. His answer was that these types of tests fail to capture the context dynamics in different territories, which is a way of emphasising, once again, how territories respond to national policies, even if they do not correspond with their own educational needs.

⁹² The definition of Normal Schools was introduced in Chapter Four. Once again, Normal schools operate like primary and secondary educational institutions that offer two additional years of vocational training for students who want to be certified as teachers in basic and medium levels of education.

Figure 22. Distribution of news pieces in *El Heraldo* according to the type of education reported

EMERGENT CATEGORIES	Basic and secondary education														Higher Education													
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014		
Academic seminars and Events	13,0	0,0	11,5	5,9	0,0	7,1	5,6	0,0	6,3	10,5	0,0	0,0	0,0	17,6	16,7	6,3	4,5	3,2	16,7	50,0	16,7	36,4	16,7	44,4	8,3	0,0		
Accountability and public debates	0,0	0,0	3,8	11,8	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	10,5	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	11,1	0,0	4,5	3,2	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	8,3	0,0	0,0	0,0		
Accreditations of EIS and Student's assessment	0,0	0,0	0,0	5,9	8,3	0,0	0,0	0,0	18,8	0,0	10,5	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	6,3	0,0	0,0	0,0	6,3	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	8,3	8,3		
Agreements and alliances between EIS	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	11,8	0,0	12,5	9,1	0,0	4,2	6,3	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0		
Anniversaries, graduations, celebrations	8,7	5,0	3,8	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	9,1	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	16,7	0,0	0,0	0,0		
Announcements and delivery of infrastructure for EIS	13,0	0,0	7,7	11,8	25,0	3,6	0,0	23,1	31,3	21,1	0,0	0,0	18,2	11,8	0,0	6,3	4,5	0,0	0,0	0,0	8,3	9,1	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0		
Complains (different actors)	0,0	10,0	3,8	11,8	0,0	3,6	5,6	3,8	6,3	5,3	5,3	0,0	0,0	5,9	0,0	0,0	4,5	6,5	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	8,3	0,0	0,0	8,3		
Corruption, sanctions and legal matters	0,0	0,0	0,0	5,9	0,0	7,1	5,6	15,4	6,3	5,3	0,0	10,0	18,2	11,8	0,0	0,0	0,0	3,2	0,0	12,5	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0		
Debt and financial problems of EIS	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	3,6	0,0	3,8	0,0	5,3	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	22,2	6,3	27,3	41,9	37,5	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	8,3	8,3		
Delivery of scholarships and credits for studying	0,0	0,0	7,7	5,9	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	37,5	4,5	6,5	8,3	6,3	0,0	0,0	0,0	11,1	8,3	0,0		
Delivery of study materials in EIS	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	3,8	0,0	5,3	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0		
Election of public officials and related controversies	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	8,3	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	15,8	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	18,8	0,0	3,2	0,0	6,3	25,0	0,0	8,3	11,1	8,3	0,0		
Government capacities to administrate	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	7,7	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0		
Local policies and programmes	8,7	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	11,1	3,8	0,0	5,3	0,0	20,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	4,5	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	16,7		
National policies and programmes	4,3	10,0	11,5	0,0	0,0	7,1	16,7	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	9,1	0,0	11,1	0,0	9,1	0,0	8,3	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0		
Offers to study (courses, programmes)	0,0	5,0	7,7	0,0	0,0	0,0	5,6	3,8	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	17,6	11,1	0,0	9,1	0,0	4,2	6,3	8,3	9,1	0,0	0,0	0,0	16,7		
Others	4,3	15,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	3,6	11,1	0,0	6,3	0,0	5,3	10,0	0,0	5,9	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	4,2	0,0	8,3	9,1	8,3	11,1	0,0	0,0		
Problems and non-teacher's related needs of EIS	17,4	10,0	7,7	0,0	50,0	25,0	0,0	0,0	12,5	10,5	15,8	30,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	4,5	3,2	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	8,3	0,0		
Problems with the appointment of teachers	0,0	0,0	3,8	5,9	0,0	10,7	5,6	0,0	0,0	10,5	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0		
Notes on the progress and challenges in education	0,0	20,0	15,4	17,6	0,0	3,6	5,6	7,7	0,0	10,5	0,0	0,0	27,3	5,9	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	4,2	0,0	0,0	9,1	16,7	0,0	0,0	0,0		
Protests and public manifestations	8,7	15,0	7,7	5,9	0,0	3,6	11,1	7,7	6,3	0,0	5,3	10,0	9,1	0,0	22,2	0,0	9,1	3,2	0,0	0,0	0,0	9,1	8,3	22,2	8,3	0,0		
Recognitions of people or institutions	4,3	0,0	0,0	5,9	0,0	0,0	5,6	3,8	0,0	0,0	31,6	0,0	9,1	0,0	0,0	6,3	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	8,3	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	16,7		
Scientific outputs of EIS	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	5,9	0,0	0,0	0,0	3,2	4,2	0,0	16,7	0,0	0,0	0,0	16,7	0,0		
Social projects of EIS	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	7,7	6,3	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	8,3	0,0	0,0	0,0	8,3	0,0		
Teacher's skills and trainings	0,0	5,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	3,6	5,6	0,0	0,0	0,0	10,5	10,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	4,5	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	8,3	0,0			
Technology (ICTs) in education	8,7	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	5,6	3,8	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0			
Violence, security in EIS	8,7	5,0	3,8	0,0	8,3	17,9	0,0	3,8	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	5,9	5,6	0,0	0,0	22,6	8,3	6,3	0,0	18,2	8,3	0,0	8,3	25,0		
Wages of educators and teacher's appointments	0,0	0,0	3,8	5,9	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	10,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0		

Source: Author's calculations. Notes: EIS stands for Educational Institutions

Figure 23. Distribution of news pieces in *La Libertad* according to the type of education reported

EMERGENT CATEGORIES	Basic and secondary education													Higher Education												
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Academic seminars and Events	5,6	5,7	8,7	17,7	17,9	10,3	9,7	5,6	13,1	3,6	2,8	0,0	4,8	36,8	0,0	28,8	15,2	30,9	18,4	26,2	20,5	17,6	22,7	21,7	10,0	8,1
Accountability and public debates	14,8	5,7	4,3	4,8	2,6	4,4	5,4	7,4	13,1	9,6	5,6	5,5	0,0	5,3	18,2	1,9	6,1	14,8	16,3	9,5	7,7	3,9	6,8	8,7	4,0	13,5
Accreditations of EIS and Student's assessment	0,0	8,6	4,3	9,7	12,8	7,4	9,7	11,1	3,3	12,0	0,0	9,1	2,4	5,3	9,1	0,0	0,0	1,2	2,0	7,1	0,0	2,0	6,8	0,0	2,0	0,0
Agreements and alliances between EIS	0,0	0,0	2,2	0,0	0,0	0,0	4,3	1,9	4,9	1,2	1,4	9,1	0,0	5,3	4,5	5,8	9,1	2,5	2,0	2,4	7,7	5,9	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0
Anniversaries, graduations, celebrations	3,7	5,7	8,7	0,0	0,0	1,5	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	2,4	15,8	0,0	3,8	9,1	2,5	2,0	2,4	0,0	2,0	0,0	4,3	2,0	18,9
Announcements and delivery of infrastructure for EIS	5,6	5,7	10,9	4,8	10,3	10,3	4,3	0,0	3,3	1,2	0,0	5,5	4,8	0,0	0,0	0,0	3,0	0,0	0,0	2,4	2,6	0,0	2,3	8,7	4,0	0,0
Complains (different actors)	1,9	0,0	0,0	3,2	0,0	1,5	1,1	1,9	0,0	4,8	4,2	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	1,9	0,0	0,0	4,1	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	2,0	0,0
Corruption, sanctions and legal matters	0,0	0,0	2,2	0,0	0,0	1,5	2,2	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	1,8	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	16,7	2,6	3,9	6,8	4,3	12,0	2,7
Debt and financial problems of EIS	0,0	0,0	2,2	0,0	0,0	4,4	3,2	3,7	1,6	3,6	1,4	5,5	0,0	5,3	18,2	0,0	15,2	4,9	2,0	0,0	2,6	0,0	4,5	2,2	4,0	0,0
Delivery of scholarships and credits for studying	0,0	0,0	4,3	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	1,9	0,0	2,4	1,4	0,0	4,8	0,0	0,0	5,8	9,1	12,3	10,2	4,8	12,8	3,9	4,5	8,7	8,0	2,7
Delivery of study materials in EIS	3,7	2,9	6,5	0,0	0,0	2,9	3,2	7,4	0,0	7,2	2,8	3,6	2,4	0,0	0,0	0,0	3,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	2,0	0,0	0,0	2,0	0,0
Election of public officials and related controversies	0,0	2,9	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	1,2	2,8	1,8	0,0	0,0	9,1	15,4	0,0	1,2	0,0	0,0	2,6	0,0	6,8	6,5	14,0	8,1
Government capacities to administrate	7,4	0,0	0,0	3,2	2,6	0,0	2,2	7,4	1,6	1,2	9,9	1,8	4,8	0,0	4,5	0,0	3,0	0,0	0,0	2,4	0,0	7,8	11,4	2,2	6,0	5,4
Local policies and programmes	3,7	8,6	0,0	0,0	5,1	8,8	7,5	1,9	6,6	4,8	5,6	7,3	7,1	5,3	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	2,0	0,0	2,2	2,0	2,7
National policies and programmes	7,4	2,9	8,7	4,8	7,7	14,7	5,4	22,2	4,9	3,6	25,4	9,1	14,3	0,0	4,5	1,9	0,0	1,2	2,0	2,4	2,6	5,9	2,3	2,2	2,0	5,4
Notes on the progress and challenges in education	3,7	5,7	2,2	6,5	2,6	1,5	2,2	3,7	6,6	6,0	1,4	7,3	7,1	0,0	4,5	5,8	0,0	2,5	4,1	0,0	5,1	2,0	11,4	4,3	2,0	2,7
Offers to study (courses, programmes)	0,0	8,6	2,2	3,2	0,0	2,9	4,3	0,0	1,6	0,0	2,8	1,8	4,8	0,0	9,1	7,7	9,1	1,2	12,2	4,8	15,4	11,8	6,8	6,5	6,0	8,1
Others	3,7	8,6	4,3	1,6	5,1	4,4	6,5	5,6	3,3	3,6	4,2	5,5	4,8	5,3	0,0	3,8	6,1	2,5	8,2	2,4	5,1	5,9	2,3	0,0	2,0	0,0
Problems and non-teacher's related needs of EIS	13,0	5,7	2,2	8,1	0,0	4,4	1,1	1,9	3,3	8,4	8,5	3,6	4,8	0,0	4,5	0,0	0,0	1,2	0,0	2,4	0,0	3,9	0,0	2,2	0,0	2,7
Problems with the appointment of teachers	0,0	5,7	2,2	4,8	0,0	4,4	3,2	0,0	3,3	7,2	1,4	1,8	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0
Protests and public manifestations	9,3	0,0	2,2	8,1	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	1,6	2,4	1,4	10,9	2,4	10,5	4,5	9,6	9,1	1,2	4,1	2,4	0,0	7,8	2,3	10,9	12,0	2,7
Recognitions of people or institutions	3,7	0,0	6,5	1,6	12,8	0,0	8,6	1,9	4,9	2,4	5,6	3,6	7,1	0,0	0,0	5,8	0,0	3,7	2,0	9,5	2,6	3,9	0,0	4,3	2,0	5,4
Scientific outputs of EIS	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	4,5	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	2,0	0,0
Social projects of EIS	3,7	11,4	0,0	1,6	0,0	1,5	1,1	3,7	8,2	0,0	0,0	0,0	2,4	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	1,2	2,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0
Teacher's skills and trainings	0,0	2,9	8,7	4,8	0,0	7,4	0,0	1,9	1,6	1,2	0,0	0,0	0,0	5,3	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	2,0	0,0	0,0	3,9	2,3	0,0	0,0	0,0
Technology (ICTs) in education	5,6	0,0	6,5	1,6	12,8	4,4	11,8	0,0	4,9	2,4	2,8	3,6	7,1	0,0	4,5	0,0	3,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	2,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0
Violence, security in EIS	1,9	2,9	0,0	3,2	5,1	1,5	3,2	1,9	4,9	6,0	5,6	1,8	11,9	0,0	0,0	1,9	0,0	13,6	6,1	2,4	2,6	2,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	10,8
Wages of educators and teacher's appointments	1,9	0,0	0,0	6,5	2,6	0,0	0,0	7,4	3,3	3,6	2,8	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	1,2	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0

Source: Author's calculations. Notes: EIS stands for Educational Institutions

5.5.2. *School continue to have lots of needs, most of them non-teacher related*

This second claim addresses one specific ongoing debate of education policy in the country, at both the national and international levels. That is the debate on the need to train better teachers as they are supposed to be the single factor that explains children's performance in tests (see Chapter One). While the current exercise does not invalidate the hypothesis that teachers are important facilitators of student learning, it defies the view that if governments could improve teachers' skills they would solve many of the challenges of education at schools. The fact is that the category of non-teacher related problems at schools (i.e. the lack of proper infrastructure) accounts for most of the news published at El Heraldo in 2002, 2006, 2007, 2012 and 2013, with a peak of 50% of the news in 2006. In La Libertad the issue is also visible, though to a lesser degree, in all the years of the inquiry period except for 2006⁹³. The persistence in the reporting of various types of problems at schools, which in some cases represents basic things such as access to public services, should serve to problematise the messy narrative on teachers' excellence.

Interestingly, the category of teachers' skills and training gets relatively little mention in both periodicals, with exception of the later years in El Heraldo, and years 2004 and 2007 in La Libertad. There are some discussions about the issue in both periodicals at the Higher Education level, but with a low intensity considering the fact that these institutions in which primary and secondary school teachers receive their training - private universities have a significant role in this regard compared to public institutions. When one looks at the content of the news items, there are indeed reports on different activities with teachers, including interexchange programmes with (mostly) North American universities, aimed specifically at providing training in a second language (i.e. English). Both periodicals, at least in the sample, implicitly assume the importance of this issue, but neither reported hardly any discussion, such as, for example, their pedagogical rationale or the specific role in the learning of children, on these training programmes. Here it is worth highlighting one note that appeared in the year 2014 in La Libertad, in which the results of a study by the Universidad Nacional de Colombia discussed how policy discussions in the country always privilege financial or administrative components over pedagogical ones. In that same year, El Heraldo published a note reflecting on the bad PISA results, linking the teachers' skills to those results.

5.5.3. *The modernisation of the education sector in Atlántico is, in the best of cases, limited*

According to school supervisors, one could easily distinguish a transition (somewhere around the half way through the decade) in the emphasis of public policies in the country and the region. They refer to a shift in the policy focus from building the capacities of local institutions (such as the Secretariat of Education), to one in which policy efforts started focusing on education planning inside educational institutions. For supervisors, this switch in emphasis is in some ways a continuation of a progressive process, which started with the strengthening of local institutions, so that they could better contribute to strengthen schools.

⁹³ The contrast with El Heraldo is noticeable for this specific year (50% vs 0). However, given the smaller number of news pieces reported by El Heraldo than La Libertad (12 vs 39 for primary and secondary education for that year, respectively), in absolute values the difference is not that huge. El Heraldo reported in total 6 news items in that category in that year.

At first sight, the reports in periodicals confirm such dynamics. Reading the press coverage allowed for the creation of a single category named *Government capacities to administer*, which grouped news stories referring to initiatives to strengthening the Departmental Secretariat of Education to carry out different processes such as the consolidation of information or specific activities to design and implement educational projects. Most of those news pieces appear in *La Libertad*. In 2002, for example, these were compatible with the logic of Law 715, including items on the certification of the Secretariat of Education in Soledad (the second biggest city in the Department), the reorganisation of personnel plans and the monitoring of school indicators, among others. 2005 also saw relatively important activity on this issue, including two news pieces: one of them was about the elaboration of improvement plans in schools. In 2008, which also saw a high frequency of news in this category, the topic of discussion was about the generation of skills to enable schools to undertake the process school plan improvement, primarily through teachers' and school directors' skills. The trend was similar in 2010.

There are reasons, nonetheless, to problematise the narrative of school modernisation. Firstly, the relatively low frequency of news pieces in both periodicals is indicative of the relatively low priority of the process of school modernisation in the public debate. In that regard, *El Heraldo* shows less interest in reporting such types of events (only 7.7% of the news in 2009). More important, however, are the contents of other categories as they unveil the limited efficiency of the local government to solve pressing issues at schools. The fact that one of the most frequent categories in all years is non-teacher related problems at schools is at least indicative of the lack of real capacity by the educational authorities to respond effectively with solutions for schools. The not insignificant number of news pieces reporting complaints (from different sectors), protests and demonstrations should also serve to illustrate that last point. Likewise, there is one news piece in *El Heraldo* in 2007 in which the Ministry of Education denounces how the high rotation of officials in the regional educational sector affects educational governance, and a 2012 news item in *La Libertad* which insists that the Secretary of Education still experienced problems in enforcing the non-tuition fee law in schools⁹⁴.

5.5.4. *El Heraldo views schools as a homogenous amalgam; La Libertad highlights more their diversity*

Finally, it is worth highlighting the different way in which both periodicals tend to frame news about education in the region. According to Chong & Druckman (2007) '[p]ublic opinion often depends on how elites choose to frame issues' (p. 99). This framing refers to diverse elements around the publication or broadcast of events, such as the use of words, images, and presentation styles. Furthermore, according to Gamson & Modigliani (1989):

... media discourse can be conceived of as a set of interpretive packages that give meaning to an issue. A package has an internal structure. At its core is a central organizing idea, or frame, for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at

⁹⁴ The non-tuition fee Law applied to all alumni of public schools from 2012. However, this benefit already applied to specific populations, as the poorest households in the country, before 2010. See: <http://www.mineducacion.gov.co/cvn/1665/w3-article-279832.html>

issue. “Media frames,” (...) organize the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us who rely on their reports.” This frame typically implies a range of positions, rather than any single one, allowing for a degree of controversy among those who share a common frame (p. 3)

Such insights indicate that contrasting different types of frames informs researchers not only about the way in which press information helps shape public perceptions on different issues but also on the way such shaping illustrates competing cultures (i.e. views, preferences) in society. Culture, as discussed by Archer (1985), is not a homogeneous, or integrated force - this is an issue to be further discussed in Part IV of this thesis. Some elements were already mentioned in Chapter 2. While the interest here is not to unleash a deep constructivist analysis about different meanings and constructed realities, the explicit differences in the types of resources consulted for the media analysis allows the raising of some useful comparisons that add in the understanding of complex educational dynamics in Atlántico. As Colombia is one of the most unequal and elitist societies in Latin America (Robinson, 2007), the contrasting targets of *El Heraldo* and *La Libertad* should offer insights into how powerful social groups, and less powerful ones, view and experience education. Conversely, such reflections unveil further insights of dominant structures in society pushing towards the consolidation of particular forms of education policies.

From the frequencies of news pieces per periodical, the differences are quite visible. As discussed above, *La Libertad* dedicates more space to and prioritises education (arguably) more than its counterpart. The distribution of the news categories by year (Figures 22 and 23) are also quite telling. In primary and secondary education, most of the news pieces reported by *El Heraldo* focus (relatively speaking) on the announcement and delivery of public infrastructure and on reporting problems and the non-teaching-related needs of EIS. This periodical gives some relatively important emphasis to the notes on the progress and challenges in education. In the case of higher education, *El Heraldo* privileges the publication of news on academic events and seminars, followed by the issue of debt and the financial problems faced by institutions of higher education. Categories such as the delivery of scholarships and violence in institutions are also visible in this periodical. Regarding the content of such types of news items, the reading of information reveals patterns, such as the way violence and problems are more generally related to public institutions (for instance, the issue of university debt refers mostly to financial problems at the Universidad del Atlántico).

By contrast, *La Libertad* has a wider scope in the news they report. The announcement of public infrastructure in primary and secondary education is certainly a relevant one. But *La Libertad* also devotes important space to reporting about academic seminars and events in schools, public debates, national policies, or the implementation of ICT in schools. In the case of higher education, *La Libertad* also reports frequently news about academic seminars and events but is also open to reporting about public debates, the delivery of scholarships (as in *El Heraldo*), the election of public officials (including IES administrators) and demonstrations. It is relevant to say that the level of reporting on *La Libertad* in pressing political issues, such as violence against educators, or the consequences of the flooding

that affected the region in 2010, is visibly higher than in the case of its counterpart. La Libertad also makes more visible the recognition of persons and institutions.

What the patterns of news stories in the periodicals show is that for El Heraldito, schools seem to be a more *homogenous amalgam*, than for La Libertad, which highlights the diversity of institutions around the country. El Heraldito portrays primary and secondary education more in terms of the building of schools and their subsequent needs. For La Libertad, however, there are many more items to highlight. Again, given that El Heraldito's target readership is business and industrial and commercial actors in the region, one could conclude that these sectors of society show less interest in the complexities of education policy and their results. That is not a trivial situation. The readers of El Heraldito are those who tend to move the economy in the region (see section 6.1). Hence, one can also imagine that they have more power, vis-à-vis the readers of La Libertad, to shape education policies and investments. From that point of view, their relative lack of interest in discussing education should help us to understand the mediocre educational results in the region.

6.5. Conclusion

The facts and the qualitative evidence discussed in this Chapter outline a pessimistic panorama. In line with other authors such as Soifer (2015), Parada (2013) and Henríquez (2013) quoted in the text, the findings in this Chapter reveal the weaknesses of Atlánticos' educational institutions, particularly of the Department's Secretariat of Education, to lead relevant local educational reforms. Once again, evidence shows the limited *de facto* political decentralisation of education, at least in this region of the country, and the preponderance of administrative reforms that safeguard a rather asymmetrical relationship between the national government and its counterparts in the regions and sub-regions of the country.

One relevant contribution of this Chapter is that it reveals the complex nature of education policy in the region, with a particular emphasis on the post-Law 715 period after 2001. While one aim of that educational reform was to organise the educational sector, more than one decade later it is unclear whether the Department of Atlántico today can rely on stronger educational institutions to foster the transformation of the learning institutions it guides and regulates. The process has been far from a smooth one. The resistance by some different sectors (such as students and teachers) and the multiple complaints expressed by different members of society, serve as evidence of this. The frequency of news reports about the pending challenges of education across the decade also serve to support this claim. Likewise, problems at schools persist. And while supervisors suggest otherwise, events show that the change in focus in the public administration of education from the traditional emphasis on granting access (i.e. the Department is still building schools) is, in the best of cases, subtle. Evidence reveals, for instance, the scarcity in debates about specificities on learning pedagogics, as opposed to general claims on the need to improve students' performance in standardised tests. The cultural dimension of this is also on the table. The evidence that such types of debates are of secondary importance to those who carry more power to shape policy debates in the region helps to understand the early stage that best describes the progress of the educational panorama of the region.

PART IV: LINKING STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

The final Part of this dissertation engages in the application of the MGA, as a DSMT, to study structure and agency interactions to account for the persistence of poor school performance in schools from Northern Colombia. The single Chapter of this Part of the thesis, Chapter Seven, draws upon the elements of the previous chapters to theorise about the topic at stake, once again, in the form of a *middle-range theory*. The following quote from Pawson's (2000) reflection on middle-range realism is illustrative of this ultimate goal of the dissertation to become a foundation (or a departing point) for unleashing education policy debates that transcend the narrow scope of the mainstream educational research in the country (see Chapter One):

Empirical research presses forever into the new. Researchers begin with crudely formulated problems and incipient hunches. The routine starting point is an embryonic identification of 'key issues', which then leads to the selection of appropriate cases to be studied and the creation of instruments of data collection and analysis (...). Middle-range thinking is born out of pragmatism and the desire to improve the craft of research and its pay-off lies in substantiated, substantive sociology (...). *[H]ypotheses attempting to explain social outcomes in terms of the action of generative mechanisms acting in conducive contexts are the crucial building blocks of research design in sociology* (284-285. *Emphasis added*).

Critical realism, as Bhaskar (2016) himself once declared, 'aspires to clear the ground a little, removing, in the first place, the philosophical [obstacles] that lie in the way of scientific knowledge (...) in the domain of social sciences' (p. 2). The challenges to introducing CR into the study of schooling in Colombia, such as the accentuated role of empiricism in the debate, or the scarcity of applied work to help to guide its application, reveal important *obstacles* to the the accumulation of knowledge in that field. It is thus worth restating that this thesis transcends the defence of simplistic normative stands in education policy (i.e. schools *need* to become more effective) by suggesting the need to return to more basic questions on how to understand why things happen in the way they do rather than otherwise. From such a perspective, this dissertation seeks to make progress, using Pawson's (2000) language, in the setting up of those *initial hunches* towards the identification of *key issues* that represent the (new) building blocks of the education policy debate. This does not preclude the fact that the dissertation unleashes an (initial) effort to theorise about the issue at stake. One specific implication of this whole methodological approach is that, even though the results of the thesis are fallible (in a way, all social theory is), they still provide various elements upon which policymakers can start innovating the conversation on how they seek to foster, and to what extent, educational change.

With these considerations in mind, Chapter Seven of the thesis draws on the Archerian notion of the building of an *analytical history of emergence* (see Chapter Two) about the persistence of poor school performance in the areas under study. In doing so, the subsequent analysis brings together the insights from Chapters Three and Four (the independent exploration of elements of human agency), with those of Chapters Five and Six (the independent study of social structures), in the form of a morphogenetic analysis of the emergence of the *persistence of school failure*. Chapter Two of this document introduced the methodological foundations for such an analysis. In a nutshell:

... [In Figure 3 of Chapter Two] the conditioning linkages connecting Phase I and Phase II were seen to consist in the distribution of vested interests and to work by confronting agents with different situational logics for their attainment (...). In direct parallel, the connective mechanism between Phase II and Phase III works through exchange and power. However, as linkages, these are not generalized social media (as in functionalism), but are themselves relational properties: their status is also that of emergent properties. This is in contradistinction too to those approaches (like structuration theory) which view 'transformative capacity' as always entailing power - of agents to 'get others to comply with their wants'. By highlighting power alone this serves to undercut three sources of elaboration, arising from different types of interaction - the confluence of desires, power-induced compliance, and reciprocal exchange (Archer, 1995, p. 296)

Through the reading of this last Part of the document, in the quest to explore and study forms of social interaction and (re)elaboration (i.e. of ideas, of the distribution of material resources), the reader will encounter some discussions mentioned only marginally in the previous chapters. Some (relatively) novel topics introduced here are, for instance, a debate about neoliberalism and the relation of this concept to the understanding of the state (state theory). This non-linear way of theorising educational change in Colombia - some readers might ask, *why weren't those concepts introduced earlier?* - reflects the iterative spirit of abduction and retroduction discussed in Chapter Two (see, particularly, Figure 2 in that same Chapter). This is because the relevance of introducing these discussions is itself a result of the theoretical explorations in the empirical chapters of the thesis, which are, likewise, inspired by the empirical question that initiated the (methodological and conceptual) discussion in the first place. For instance, the exploration of history in Part III of the thesis made visible the need to explore further global dynamics to understand the shaping and reshaping of national and local educational institutions. The results of the analyses that emerge from this conclusive theoretical effort of the thesis allow answering the research questions of the dissertation. These answers make part of the corpus of the conclusion of the document. One advantage of leaving that task to the very last section is the possibility of combining it with the presentation of a synthesis of the whole analytical endeavour of the doctoral project, hence making it easier for readers to make sense of the process through which those (*middle-ranged* answers) arose.

Chapter Seven: The Political Economy School Effectiveness in Colombia: A morphogenetic account

7.1. Introduction

This Chapter is about the theorising, under a realist umbrella, about the persistence of school failure in Northern Colombia (with the caveats mention in the foreword to Part IV of the dissertation). As such, the discussion that follows concludes by answering the research questions presented in Chapter Two. As a reminder, the main question of the dissertation is the following: *How to explain the persistence of poor school performance in national standardised exams in municipalities in Northern Colombia?* The critical realist understanding of the problem, viewed from the morphogenetic perspective of society, allows for a disentangling of that main inquiry into components of structure and agency in the form of two sub-questions. The first sub-question is: *What type of behavioural guidance (or situational logics) emerge from educational structures acting upon the members (i.e. teachers, parents, teachers) of failing schools in Northern Colombia?* Such an enquiry draws, basically, on the time span between T1 and T2 of Archer's model (Figure 3). The second sub-question is: *How does local agency mediate the conditioning power of educational structures?* This last query refers to T2 and T3 of the MGA and delineates the social elaboration stage in T4.

At this point, it is important to return to the debate in the Introduction and in Chapter Two of this document (and in the foreword to Part IV) about the use of the MGA as a DSMT, and not as an Explanatory Programme (EP). Such a distinction guides this thesis' take on Archer's (2013) (more general) SAC framework. More than following the application of her model *to the letter*, the value of morphogenising social theory lies in its explicit endorsement of analytical dualism (or the methodological argument that states that all material and cultural structures of society always exert their powers to shape society through, and not in spite of, people). Likewise, the recognition of the material, cultural and human aspects of society, in a non-conflationary fashion, is the *sine qua non* for the theorisation of causality in the social sciences.

Social reality—any section of it—is intrinsically, inherently and ineluctably 'peopled'. Its ontological constitution is utterly activity-dependent, despite the fact that people's thoughts and actions give rise to factors that are 'not people'—the most important of these being culture and structure. Because of this there seems to be general agreement that for any process to merit consideration as a generator of social change it must necessarily incorporate structured human relations (context-dependence), human actions (activity-dependence) and human ideas (concept-dependence). Necessarily, the three make social theorising non-naturalistic. A more familiar way of putting the above is that every theory about the social order necessarily has to incorporate SAC: structure, agency and culture. The problem in hand will govern which of the three is accorded most attention and the acronym SAC is thus not a rank ordering of priority between the three elements. This is a logical point; if some things are deemed indispensable to something else, it makes no sense to ask if one is more indispensable than the other(s) (Archer, 2013, pp. 4-5).

Back in the Introduction and in Chapter Two of the thesis, the discussion echoed the notion of the *problem at hand*, as stated in the previous quote, to justify the dissertation's methodological approach. While the research elaborates on a specific question - on the matter of poor school performance - the challenge for the researcher is not only empirical - to provide an answer to the problem at hand - but, it was also argued, political. As Chapter One visualised, part of the public policy challenge in engaging with the multiple difficulties faced by schools lies in the fact that policymakers have an immanently limited ability to understand the problem or are ill-equipped to theorise about its underlying causes. Hence, this thesis is not just about education, but also about introducing a different, and better grounded, research paradigm to inform policy debates in Colombia. Chapter One represents that effort and signifies a key output in that regard. Having to split between those two tasks - justification and theorisation - becomes an argument that further supports the decision to morphogenise the study of secondary education in Colombia, rather than engaging deeper with the MGA.

Archer's excerpt above also vindicates the importance of considering the activities of people. From that point of view, one goal of social theory is to construct analytical frameworks that facilitate the understanding of 'the process through which the individual is constituted as an agent within the structures of [the] economy [and society]' (Watson, 2005, p. 99). This goal is coherent to analytical dualism, which invites researchers to study the way in which people, with their individual resources, and as part of society, make sense of their reality. *Practices at the everyday level* represent that arena of action from which different indications can be retrieved on the way in which the subjective perception of individuals, and the actions they undertake, are shaped by objective forces that transcend local agency (in the present tense). It also escalates them up into the complexities of broader contexts, nationally and internationally. Roberts (2015) insists upon this last issue (see Chapter Three), which accounts for the need to consider the dialectal relationship between parts (i.e. the experience of students, teachers and parents in certain contexts) and totalities (the national education policy). Dialectics, as emphasised by this last author, teaches scholars that society is an 'interconnected historical totality so that concrete [and differentiated] events are themselves moments of this totality' (Roberts-Holmes, 2015, p. 19).

Verger, Fontdevila & Zancajo (2016) argue that many different typologies of contemporary educational systems and reforms 'emerged in a specific historical, political, and economic context strongly marked by the emerging hegemony of neoliberal principles' (pp. Chap 3, paragraph 3). Acknowledging this coheres with the dialectical move mentioned above and its key to connecting the findings of some case studies with global educational debates. For these last authors, educational reforms that took place in Latin America were possible because of the institutionalisation of sets of ideas throughout the 1970s and 1980s, which enabled a certain restructuration of state-society relations. It is not a coincidence that Gindle (2004) presents educational reforms in Colombia during the 1990s as reforms in which the *role* of the sub-national *state* (the Department) *was strengthened* vis-à-vis the national education policy. One aim of this current analysis is to clarify the way in which those ideational features interacted with material elements in Colombian society to forge the emergence of its contemporary education system.

The notion of the state and state theory is, therefore, relevant to the current research. The state-market binary, as described in much of the international mainstream literature on SE, and its immanent

tendency to portray the state as a black box from which reforms *magically* emerge, obscures much of the debate about the impact of educational reform in Colombia, and alternatives to it. For example, by conflating the notion of the state's policy-making apparatus with its political authority (which is also a result of the balance of power in society), 'it is assumed that politics equates with the state's pursuit of some pre-given interest' (Watson, 2005, p. 179). Said differently, by reducing the state's power to its physical capacity, scholarly work fails to problematise where the state's projects came from (they assume these are a given), to focus most of its analytical efforts in questions pertaining to the state's technical capacity to achieve modernity-oriented goals (i.e. increase the productivity of schools). In the Colombian case, for instance, much of the rationale supporting finance-led reforms in education draws on some empirical myths (i.e. the Colombian state is too big) to argue in favour of fiscal discipline and the implicit requirement to depoliticise education debates (i.e. as politics deviates policymakers from important technical concerns). However, the notion that education as a technical rather than a political endeavour coincides much with the *ethos* of the quest for efficiency in public spending and sponsors artificial dilemmas (i.e. big state vs small state) that narrow the spectrum for policy debates. Soifer's (2015) and Parada's (2013) message on the lack of a clear national educational project in the country becomes a clear empirical insight of the nonsense of assuming ideal types of Weberian state forms as a unique compass from where to judge the progress and shortcomings of secondary education policy in the country.

Before delving into the theoretical endeavour of this Chapter, it is, therefore, relevant to situate this study's *problématique* within an ontological debate on the political economy of the neoliberal state that fits in the metatheory of CR. One suitable approximation consists in visualising the state as a set of 'relationships among actors and social objects (e.g. policy) and the ways that these actors and objects are globally and locally constituted, constrained, and enabled' (Edwards Jr & Brehm, 2015, p. 276). The implementation of Archer's approach can benefit from that discussion to help to define, analytically and empirically, the boundaries of its different stages (see Figure 2 in Chapter Two).

7.2. On Neoliberalism and the political economy of the state

Contemporary literature in the field of political economy offers multiple approaches to the understanding of neoliberalism. Ball's (2012) work is pioneering in linking neoliberalism with the discussion on global and national education policies. Here he quotes other scholarly work to position his own definition of neoliberalism neither as

... a concrete economic doctrine nor as a definite set of political projects. Rather, I treat neoliberalism as a complex, often incoherent, unstable and even contradictory set of practices that are organized around a certain imagination of the 'market' as a basis for 'the universalisation of market-based social relations, with the corresponding penetration in almost every single aspect of our lives of the discourse and/or practice of commodification, capital-accumulation and profit-making' (p. 3)

In defence of such a definition, Ball (2012) argues that his intention is not to criticise neoliberalism, but to explore how it operates in a variety of aspects of human life. Hence his intention is not to study

a causal linkage between neoliberalism and the making of education policy. He then clarifies that he is satisfied with such a view because it conceives both the material and the ideational dimensions of the debate that help to elucidate complex relationships between governments and the governed, and issues of power, knowledge, sovereignty and territoriality. He also introduces a notion of the national state in his conceptualisation, to argue that ‘some of the ongoing developments in global policy raise questions about whether more and more states are losing the ability to control their education systems – denationalisation’ (Ball S. , 2012, p. 3). In line with Watson’s (2005) citation quoted earlier in this Chapter, this last point by Ball victimises the notion of the national state as a black-boxed force that is losing the battle against the machinery of neoliberal reforms.

Part of Ball’s notion of neoliberalism, as he makes clear, elaborates on Ong’s (2007) use of Foucauldian governmentality. While such a framework is useful in highlighting immanent contradictions of neoliberal reforms across sectors of society, its biggest weakness lies in the detachment from notions of structures, institutions and the context within which such governmentalities take form. Brenner et al. (2010) examined the issue in more detail and concluded the following:

[Ong] purposively disruptive notions of context-drenched, haphazardly mobile, radically fluid and infinitely mutable neoliberalization are derived from a caricature of structuralist approaches, which are claimed to conceive market-oriented regulatory restructuring as being functionally predetermined, universalizing, territorially immobilized and rigid. Some limitations of the governmentality approach to neoliberalization follow, in fact, from this exaggerated antagonism to more structuralist, macropolitical perspectives. While governmentality scholars rightly insist that neoliberalizing logics do not engender deterministic institutional outcomes, their low-flying, rigidly anti-systemic orientation tends to obscure from view those macrospatial rules, parameters and mechanisms that serve to channel, circumscribe and pattern the contextually embedded forms of regulatory experimentation they are concerned to decipher (p. 201)

Linking these last ideas with more general ontological discussions (see Chapters One and Two), it is clear that Ball’s (2012) approach to neoliberalism is in the form of a conflation between structure and agency. Hence, it is ‘inadequately equipped to grasp the churning *patterns* and *frames* of regulatory uneven development that lies at the heart of contemporary forms of neoliberalization’ (Brenner et al., 2010, p. 201. *Original emphases*). Conceiving neoliberalism not as a process but as a technology of control, is problematic as it ends up reproducing the false antagonism between the state (as a geographically located entity) and neoliberal (possibly marked driven) reforms. Furthermore, it suggests that both forces (i.e. a neoliberal education reform and the state) are necessarily in contradiction. For the specific case of Colombia, such a view has been openly problematised by authors such as Vanegas (2003), whose work is published in a volume edited by Ball (2012) himself. In her view, ‘the [neoliberal] influence does not simply happen as a result of imposition from the

North to the South, but rather through a complex relationship of power that impacts greatly on the capability of individuals to exert change' (Vanegas P. , 2003, p. 227).

The approach of this dissertation on the relationship between neoliberalism and the state is, therefore, different from Ball's (2012). Rather than seeing neoliberalism and the state as two independent ontological objects, this dissertation sees it as more promising to study the latter as an emergent property that came into existence and that experiences possible changes and transformations within the context of the former. Such a view is arguably similar to the one endorsed by Jessop (2016) in his Strategic-Relational Approach (SRA) to study society. According to this author

Instead of looking at the state as a substantial, unified thing or unitary subject, the SRA widens its focus, so as to capture not just the state apparatus but the exercise and effects of state power as a contingent expression of a changing balance of forces that seek to advance their respective interests inside, through, and against the state system (...) The changing balance of forces is mediated institutionally, discursively, and through governmental technologies. It is conditioned by the specific institutional structures and procedures of the state apparatus as embedded in the wider political system and envioning societal relations. The effectiveness of state capacities depends in turn on links to forces that operate beyond the state's formal boundaries and act as 'force multipliers' or, conversely, divert, subvert, or block its interventions (pp. 54, 55).

Chapter Two of this dissertation briefly compared Archer's MGA and Jessops SRA. For that reason, it is relevant to clarify how bringing in Jessop to assist in conceptualising the state does not entail a contradiction. On the one hand, based on the former quote, the focus to his approach to analysing state-society relationships as embedded in wider political relationships coheres quite clearly with Archer's study of emergent properties of social objects as embedded, but not reduced to, the emergent properties of pre-existing social objects. On the other hand, given that the intention here is not to unleash an SRA type of analysis, the endorsement of this general ideas does not clash with the epistemic considerations of CR discussed throughout the thesis⁹⁵. That being said, the notion of disentangling (not disconnecting) state power from the state apparatus, or as Watson (2005) frames it, the state project that sets the underlying principles of policy planning apart from the state's policy-making institutions (i.e. laws, rules, institutions), represents an analytical advantage. In the end, '*the state* bears neither an interest nor a will of its own; rather, policy output reflects the internal characteristics of the prevailing state project. In turn, this reflects the balance of political forces within society' (Watson, 2005, p. 196. *Original emphasis*).

⁹⁵ As was noted before, the MGA and the SRA do have substantial differences when it comes to their ontological and epistemological principles. However, one way of seeking to reconcile these differences is by suggesting that the methodological proposals of the former are embedded in the latter. McAnulla's (2005) critique cited before suggests that the SRA reproduces some of the problems of Gidden's central conflation in the structure and agency debate. However, McAnulla also suggests such an approach is not wrong per se, but can embrace a critical realist notion of social structures, such as the Archerian one, to 'more securely ground [its form of] (...) analysis' (McAnulla, 2005, p. 37).

Under such a view, notions of the state and a neoliberal regime do not necessarily need to be (while they can be) in contradiction. For instance, while one can find necessary internal connections between elements of the state's apparatus (i.e. the ICFES evaluates the productivity of education in Colombia), there might be contingent expressions of power, depending on which political forces won the elections. Such analytical possibilities are more proper of open systems, as CR contends for the social world, and are part of the reason why, rather than being part of a perfect plan, most education policy reforms in Latin America are a result of unexpected policy outcomes. Grindle (2004), who introduced this last hypothesis, further argues for the importance of non-deterministic approaches to study society, as they provide 'powerful and intuitive explanations for the existence of opposition to changes that might be socially beneficial' (p. 12).

As for neoliberalism, the current dissertation adheres to notions such as Koning's (2012) and Boyer's (2000), whose approach to its study emphasises the emergence of a new era of capitalism with origins in the 1970s. This new regime saw its sediments in the Post-New Deal financial system, and a set of new institutions that envisioned financialisation as a mechanism of socialisation, particularly among low and middle-income households in the United States of America. Scholarly work shows how, during the 1970s, 'the demand for consumer and mortgage credit accelerated in a way that the existing financial system was not delighted to accommodate. In order to respond, banks initiated a huge wave of innovation, dramatically expanding their securitization options' (Konings, 2012, p. 60). The strengthening of the banks, for whom the indebtedness of people represented an opportunity to thrive, entailed new demands for deepening and amplifying the boundaries of financial-led capitalism, and with it, the transformation of the state's apparatus to confront the new regulatory realities of the uprising regime. Such a trend, with nuanced responses across societies within their institutional settings, provide some basic characteristics of the structure and agency interactions in capitalist societies. According to Konings (2012)

Much of the neoliberal period can be understood in terms of publicly sanctioned and promoted unfolding of a high symbiotic relationship between financial innovation and elites' market power on the other hand and social trends like growing inequalities and stagnant wages on the other (...) While the integration of lower income groups into the formal financial system has widely portrayed as promoting financial inclusion, intermediaries increasingly treated low-income households as a captured market (p. 62)

From that point of view, the new financial-led accumulation regime, as represented in contemporary capitalism, does not clash with the state but shapes many of the institutions that foster its transformation. The pace and extent to which those transformations occur, and the particular forms they take, become part of the research agenda in the field of international political economy. However, there is a trend here, both material and ideological, in the focus of the expansion of neoliberal reform internationally. As Boyer suggests (2000), events such as economic crashes, inflation in the 1980s, and the fact that the levels of economic growth in the 1990s and the early 2000s were considerably lower than those experienced in the preceding decades, generated strong pressures to rationalise public

expenditure. Likewise, the deterioration of the capital-labour balance in favour of the former, has shaped citizens' social preferences, as 'the prospect of gains in the financial markets has a direct influence on the decision to save or spend' (Boyer, 2000, p. 120). In the United States at least, Boyer (2015) identified the emergence of a model of economic prosperity without effort, given the existence to incentives for people to use debt to pay for more debt.

In the specific case of global educational reforms, Mundy & Verger' (2015) analysis of the global governance of education and its genealogy since the 1960s, unveils how neoliberalism has also shaped debates in this area. The authors set their analytical lenses on the transformations experienced by the World Bank since its conception as the International Bank for the Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) onwards. In their view, in the last decades, this institution 'has arguably become the epicentre for the global governance of social policy within emerging economies and low-income societies (...) as the largest single international provider of development finance to governments' (p. 9). This view, which situates a country like a Colombia among the top borrowers of the Bank's education funds between 1996-2012, necessarily describes the influence of the World Bank's views on the way policymakers have conceived the public education agenda. This is illustrated in the Bank's various shifts in focus, from big infrastructure projects under Robert McNamara's World Bank presidency (1968-1981), to fiscal discipline and the encouragement of privatisation (1981-1995), to James Wolfensohn's presidential (1996-2005) push towards a revitalised focus on poverty alleviation.

At this point it is worth mentioning how departing from those previous historical references to situate the current analysis does not assume an uncritical stand towards these neoliberal narratives. While the selection of specific authors and scholarly works to back up the international context of the research considered their relevance from a CR realist standpoint, they are all fallible accounts of those dynamics. However, as Patomäki (2003) points out, the shaping power of the financed-led accumulation regime represents, for critical realism, 'a potentially very fruitful initial hypothesis, leading to a number of further research puzzles, one following on logically from the other' (p. 321). Even though the message here is *somehow to assume the global dynamics of neoliberalism as fixed*, analysing these big dynamics in situated contexts should provide feedback loops to eventually refine the big narrative. The intention of this dissertation is not to explicitly add knowledge to the debate on neoliberalism, but implicitly it does.

7.3. Theorising poor school performance as a common practice in schools in Northern Colombia

7.3.1. *Practices at the everyday level: stepping into a process of abduction*

Chapters Three and Four of the dissertation offer clear insights about the day-to-day experiences of parents, teachers and students in three schools in Northern Colombia. Findings suggest the relationships maintained by these actors in those specific settings are filled with tensions and demarked by contradictions. The panorama indicates that none of them finds in education what they would expect from it. Students, for instance, find the school curriculum uninteresting. While they value the existence of spaces to talk with teachers about what they see as important in life (i.e. trying to be happy), and acknowledge that some educators offer them that opportunity, they question whether

their education is relevant. The experience of observing lessons allowed the researchers to identify some general trends in teacher-student interactions, such as important levels of bad discipline (i.e. bad behaviour, disrespect to the teacher) among children, and students' disengagement in the classroom. These attitudes cohere with feelings expressed by children in group discussions and corroborate the hostility of the learning environment in educational institutions. In that regard, students also tend to disapprove of the attitudes of their teachers, from whom they would like to see greater efforts to exercise their authority in the classroom. At the same time, boys and girls are aware of some possible factors restraining teachers from doing their jobs as expected, such as their low wages, the problems they bring from home, the school director's lack of authority and even, in the case of the older teachers, their medical condition.

In the case of teachers, findings from the empirical chapters of the thesis suggest important levels of heterogeneity in their attitudes in the classroom with students. Some seem to care more than others about the education of their pupils, which is visible in how often they discipline students or make specific pedagogical efforts to gain their interest. These observations challenge the narrative of bad teaching that informs mainstream research in the field (see Chapters One and Four) in the sense that, given the history of school failure in the region, most of the teachers should simply be incompetent. When talking to them to explore their motives to act and their perceptions about their problems at schools, teachers' attitudes tend to coincide with some aspects of the students' narrative. For example, educators would also value the authority of the school director to solve the specific needs of their institution. Likewise, teachers talk about the lack of infrastructure and basic studying material at schools - on some occasions they pay for copies of readings with their own money - and some refer to their health to justify not making a bigger effort to control and motivate their students.

As for teachers' attitudes towards their students, they often talk about the lack of interest by parents to follow their children's educational process and their willingness to scold them when is necessary. Here they identify some *structural* barriers, such as the role of states policies and the propagation of children's rights in contributing to reproducing certain attitudes in students and members of their households. In their view, the state's subsidies to education distorts parents' incentives, driving their interest more towards receiving the subsidy than in making sure that students comply with their school duties. Likewise, educators fail to see how the protection of human rights contributes to protecting children's integrity, and rather relate this to an additional reason for students' bad behaviour (i.e. they are aware that adults cannot reprimand them physically). Most teachers, and particularly the oldest ones, feel nostalgic about the authority and the respect they received from children and parents in the past.

Life for parents is also not easy. The revision of some socio-economic indicators in the region (presented in Chapter Three) suggests that the municipalities studied in this thesis are dealing with a stagnant economy and, therefore, with scarce working opportunities for their community members. In fact, qualitative evidence collected in the field indicates that an important number of parents often travel to other regions, and even to the neighbouring country of Venezuela, to seek work opportunities. As a result, many students live with their grandparents and other family members, which represents an additional challenge to their emotional stability, as some teachers and school psychologists contend. Another important element here is the parents' and guardians' perception of

children's lack of values, and their questioning of schools for not nurturing better attitudes. The lack of discipline and the disrespect they experience from their sons and daughters is something in which they coincide with educators. In that regard, they also share with these last social actors the perception that teachers in the past had more authority vis-à-vis a pupil and somehow blame current teachers and school administrators from having lost that authority in the first place. Generally speaking, parents are hence less interested in the education that their children are receiving, than in the lack of proper moral values they are exposed to in learning institutions.

The discussion in this section can also profit from insights discussed in Chapter Five, and specifically section 5.4, regarding the existent relationships (in the present tense) between school directors and local, departmental and national authorities. School directors, as these authorities acknowledge, face difficulties in promptly receiving the resources for educational quality from the Mayor and from municipalities' quality committees (which, in the two cases under study, do not formally operate). The contrast between school directors' accounts and those of public servants at other levels of the government, makes evident the subtle pressure directors face from the Ministry of Education to comply with certain standards that further reduce their autonomy to act in behalf of the interest of local communities. One example of this is the need to adapt schools' study plans to the content of national standardised exams. Such concerns, as expressed by the leaders of the visited institutions, help understand why other school actors see directors as weak administrators and/or leaders and demand more authority from them in the exercise of their roles.

All these general characterisations inform the abduction process discussed in the first sections of this document. At this stage, as Vincent and Wapshott (2014) recommends, 'it is particularly useful (...) to reflect on existing theory and knowledge' (p. 155) to set hypotheses on the possible underlying drivers of the events and the perceptions that researchers retrieved in the field. Chapter Three of this thesis made some progress in that regard by identifying preliminary studies, both national and international, that explicitly address many of these issues and provide potential explanatory accounts. Studies from the economics of education in Chapter One offer this possibility as well; despite this thesis' critique of the ontological and epistemological foundations of the studies discussed in that Chapter, they do provide indications of the country's education policy operating mechanisms in different regions. The following set of (types of) hypotheses carry, hence, an important methodological weight as they help to guide the exploration of morphogenetic and morphostatic forces in education in Colombia.

1. School actors, represented by students, parents and teachers, have different expectations in education. The first wish to find spaces in which to learn about the values that will help them to be happy. Parents and educators also search for values in what schools offer to their communities, but in the form of discipline and authority. These latter groups envision, therefore, a challenge in the fact that the state's discourse on promoting children's rights distorts, rather than contributes to, the achievement of more peaceful environments at educational institutions. These dynamics might indicate the emergence of contradictions between the goals of national education policies (for instance, to pursue standards) with the principles of welfare states, such as the propagation of human rights.

2. Human capital-informed theories of education refer to the determinant role of teachers in fostering better results in students' grades. That literature indicates that, hence, the lack of quality in the skills of many educators represents one key factor to understanding the phenomenon of poor school performance. The classroom observations in this specific context, and the conversations with lesson observers make it difficult to conclude that all teachers lack the proper skills to teach. However, findings also indicate that educators do experience serious difficulties to motivate students. International literature on this matter also indicates the immanent contradiction between the development of teachers' human skills (i.e. to take care of the students' personal needs) and the demands put on teachers' excellence (i.e. their effectiveness in delivering knowledge). For some scholars, the increase of standards entails an increase of the workload, to the point that educators find harder every day to respond to aspects such as students' emotional needs (interviewed girls and boys made comments on this).

3. Education policies are embedded in broader dynamics that make part of the day-to-day relationship of the state with society. That is a message that is constantly overseen by public choice-informed frameworks (see the discussion about public choice in Chapter Five) to study decentralisation in education. Accounts from school directors, but also from public servants at the departmental and the national levels, suggest that education fails because state institutions (i.e. the Secretary of Education) fail in planning and executing education policies. It also fails because of other sectors of the state, such as the sector that administers justice and fiscal control, fails to ensure that the resources are properly delivered and executed. All these reflections resonate with national and international literature suggesting that education as a national project is, in the best of cases, a novel phenomenon in the country. From that view, it is clear education lacks a place of priority society and amongst its members.

With these (rather broad) ideas in mind, it is possible to advance the exploration of the morphogenetic logics behind the emergent school failure in the regions in this study. This assertion links to comments about middle-range realism and dialectical critical realism discussed throughout the different chapters of the dissertation. The next step in the analysis consists, hence, in making use of the tools from the MGA to explore these hypotheses further (bearing in mind, once again, the caveats discussed in the Introduction to the thesis and the foreword to Part IV). One basic insight of Archer's framework 'is that social structures condition interaction, and therefore contribute in a significant way to shape the processes that produce structural change' (Skinningsrud, 2005, p. 347). However, in CR, there is a breach between necessity and efficient causation, meaning that the study of social interactions in pre-existing contexts is vital to understand the specific events observed in specific settings.

Figure 24. The upper and lower boundaries of the current morphogenetic/static cycle

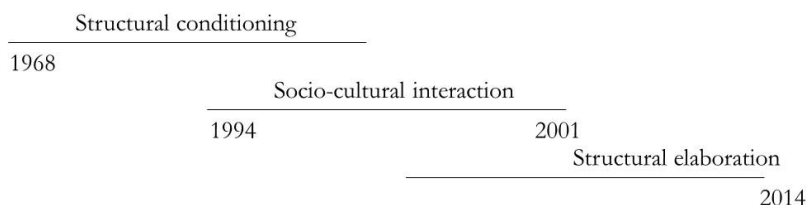


Figure 24 is a general sketch of how a general morphogenetic/static cycle operates in this setting. The definition of the specific time spans here results from making a contrast between the hypotheses above and the study of historical data by considering possible moments that deepened possible contradictions in education policies. The first moment (T1) starts in 1968 with the effort of the Colombian government to centralise education planning to solve many of the flaws (particularly the lack of administrative control of teachers in the country) experienced by the sector in the previous decades. Globally speaking, this *epoque* coincides with the birth of neoliberalism and the World Bank's emphasis on a big project-led institutional agenda on fostering development. That administrative-driven logic contradicted new social demands for political decentralisation in Colombia, a claim that is embedded within the history of violence in the country. The new constitution of 1991, and specifically the publication of Law 115 in 1994 (T2), preceded the social interactions of emerging educational actors within a decentralised educational agenda. Such interactions (T2-T3), entering a new context of economic austerity, shaped new educational institutions into those conceived by the reform of 2001 (the beginning of T3). The structural elaboration taking place in the first decade of the 21st century, and which created new shifts towards a new form of political centralisation, helps in understanding today's contradictory educational dynamics experienced at schools in the Colombian Caribbean. While this last phase allows for the building of a causal connection between the actual logic of educational systems and their outcomes, the conditions in those linkages emerged at least three decades earlier.

Methodologically speaking, and following Archer's (2011) reflections on the topic, the suggestion for the subsequent presentation of the results of the *morphognised* analysis of the thesis is to make the leap from T4, from which the previous descriptors of (actual) events take place, to the first phase of the cycle, the initial conditioning (the structural) moment (in T1). Such a turn takes distance from the analytical presentation of the MGA (regarding its application in empirical research) in Chapter Two, where the chronology of explanation suggested moving from the description of events in T4 to social interactions in the T2-T3 span, and then onto the span between T1-T2. The particular difference between both reflections (that is to say, between the reflection in section 2.3.3 and the one in the present section) lies in the distinction between the initiation of the analytic process of a realist analysis (which starts from actual events and the abduction of causal explanation) and the presentation of results. The rationale for doing so lies in the fact that, when referring to concrete (not abstract) events in the world, 'explanation will typically take the form of a narrative that utilizes theoretical language to weave together the simultaneous operation of multiple mechanisms' (Porpora, 2015, p. 59). Porpora

(2015) takes his argument further by asserting that '[i]t is in fact only such a historical account that can accommodate the causally open system constituted by the real world' (p. 60).

At this point it is worth restating, once again, the role of the MGA in this dissertation as a DSMT rather than as an Explanatory Programme (EP) standing on its own. The insistence on the idea of *morphogenising* the study of society (rather than unleashing morphogenesis as a full EP) entails, as argued before, making use of Archer's elements to build a middle-range theory (see Part I of the thesis) of school failure in Colombia. According to middle-range realism, such an endeavour consists of combining analytical efforts (using both primary and secondary data) to advance a general theory (that fits in with the ontological principles of CR), subject to new refinements as research on the matter continues. Thus said, the suggestion of building, *a priori*, the different moments of the cycle in Figure 24, using secondary data, contributes to the task of *morphogenising* the study of school performance in Colombia. Further research on this topic entails assuming such a definition of the boundaries of Archer's approach as a fallible attempt to start generating social theory. In this light, further explorations of the MGA (as, for instance, an EP) might converge in a refinement of that first hypothesis, hence obliging social researchers to consider, and argue in favour of, new time spans to define the boundaries of the morphogenetic/static cycle at stake.

7.3.2. On structural conditions for the emergence of today's schools

The current discussion can benefit from citing Soifer's (2015) work on the state-building processes in Latin America, and his specific reference to the Colombian education system. In this scholar's account:

Even in comparison to a laggard like Peru, Colombia saw little education development before 1930. Indeed, Ramírez and Téllez (2007, 475) show that as late as 1950, only about 8 percent of the country's population was enrolled in school. The failure of Colombian primary education development was also reflected in the absence of any standardization or oversight by the national government. Although fiscal constraints played a role, the limited growth of education was a direct reflection of the lack of commitment by state leaders throughout the period 1830– 1930 to building a universal, systematized education system (p. 134).

The conditioning phase of the current morphogenetic cycle started in the late 1960s with president Carlos Lleras Restrepo (1966-1970) and *The National Transformation*, which aimed to pursue the redistribution of political power in the Colombian society to contain the effects of *La Era de la Violencia*⁹⁶. To start thinking about the configuration of education policy and its institutions in those days, it is worth asking about the role of education in Colombia's pre-neoliberal society, in a context of massive migrations from the countryside into cities. According to Cajiao (2014), the country

⁹⁶ According to Bushnell (1993), *La Era of la Violencia* refers to the period in Colombia history between 1946 and 1957. Its name derives from the armed confrontation, but not in the form of a frontal civil war, between Liberals (some of them known as *Los Cachiporros*) and Conservatives (some of them responding to the name *Los Pajaros* and *Los Chulavitas*). Around 300,000 Colombians died and one fifth of the country's population suffered from forced displacement.

prepared itself for the reconfiguration of its demographic dynamics, with education fitting in as a way to *civilise* those who came from the *non-civilisation*:

It is clear, hence, that the [educational] process [before the 1970's] to civilise [people], had several purposes. On the one hand, there was the urgent need to create mechanisms of coexistence in dense urban conglomerates that required behavioural traits adapted to those conditions of agglomeration, mobilisation and mutual respect among people. For that purpose, [people's] bodies needed a new shaping to habituate themselves to proximity with others, to develop new repertoires of expression to avoid mutual aggression, [to learn new] ways to make use of public space and habits of hygiene. On the other hand, urbanity was understood as an esthetical issue, and of good taste that implied a cultural guidance for social ascension, at the time it allowed conserving distance from those [members of social] classes that we do not seek to imitate (2014, p. 21. Original Emphasis).

Schools had operated in Colombia for decades and even centuries before, and the Spanish conquerors probably had a similar philosophy about public education (Cajiao, 2014). However, schools as institutions embedded in a context of political violence had a specific role, which was to mediate many of the problems of rural Colombia into a new transformed and urbanised country. Here is worth mentioning one characteristic of Colombian society, which is 'the long endurance of the two-party system and the extraordinary ability of political elites to maintain control of the political system' (Robinson, 2005, p. 11). As a matter of fact, '[t]he country has had a long tradition of two-party politics. With the exception of one military government in 1953–1958, presidential succession has occurred according to Western electoral rules' (Palacios & Safford, 2002, p. 298). These are indications that the possible transformations experienced throughout the 1960s and the early 1970s did not entail major transformations to the status quo. For instance, as Robinson (2013) documents, although the Lleras Restrepo government, 'between 1966 and 1970, launched an ambitious program of agrarian reform, (...) [the] reform failed, mostly because [he] could not get local elites to cooperate' (p. 48). Some historians recognise the accumulation of land as one of the most profound roots the country's armed confrontation (Pizarro, 2011) and, hence, such a lack of cooperation unveiled a lack of intention by governing elites in the country to address the structural problems in society. No wonder schools barely responded to many of the expectations placed on them:

Great cities in their geographical expansion became segmented socially and economically, creating enormous gaps in communication and social exchange that were reproduced by an educational apparatus equality segmented. In that way, schools lose their transformative power that was given to them since the beginning of the XX century and starts to suffer from the tremendous influence of the cultural conditions from the periphery, which in a certain way impose in them many of the problems that it was believed they would be able to counterattack. Rather than becoming a strong institution with authority over families, society and, of course,

students, to advance in the mechanics of civilisation, it starts to suffer from the effects of a generalised crisis of the country's institutions in all their levels (Cajiao, 2014).

Although these accounts refer to the country's political dynamics of that period, it is interesting to note that many of these elements are still visible in schools in Northern Colombia. As Chapters Three and Four of this dissertation illustrated, schools experience high levels of a *lack of good* discipline among students, while parents and teachers still demand schools' role as institutions that supplement values to encourage coexistence (i.e. good behaviour) in their communities. Ontologically speaking, the endurance of these dynamics at educational institutions across time reveal the operation of at least two elements which will play a role as emergent properties of the contemporary education system of the country. One of them is a material feature (a SEP), involving the demographic transition and relocation of the population within the country because of violence. The other is cultural (CEP), as it involves the social imaginary of schools as guardians of good customs.

Making use of the insights presented in Chapter Five, the rising demand for education (as a result of the demographic phenomenon mentioned above) went hand in hand with the increase in the demand for professional educators. Given the lack of a national education project in the decades before, this increase in the numbers of teachers signified a challenge that the central elites of the country had not faced before: the need to administrate teaching bodies. Previously, this had been the duty of local governments. This context served to justify, as the Ministry of Education Octavio Arizmendi Posada did in 1968, the creation of a new institutional infrastructure to centralise the administration of education. Hence the creation of the Regional Educational Funds (FERs) in that same year, and the appointment of delegates (*delegados*) to aid the MEN in its nascent role as an inspector of local expenses in the sector (Hanson, 1983). The birth of a culture of public management in education is, hence, a new cultural feature (CEP) in the state's policy-making apparatus in education. However, the penetration of such a culture was a subtle one, at least in its first years, given the local resistance to the work of *delegados* and, as Helg (1986) points out, the eventual *politicisation* of that figure. These new dynamics, however, also had an impact on the strengthening of the recently set up Colombian Teaching Federation, FECODE, and its emerging struggles for teachers' material rights (i.e. wages, social security). In the 1990s, the administrative centralisation of teacher payment resources become one of FECODE's priorities. Hence, the structures to manage education centrally becomes a crucial SEP behind the emergence of contemporary education.

At the international level, the nascent neoliberal economic system through the 1970s started to shape the global educational debate. The education policy agenda of the World Bank, for instance, 'married a new focus on basic education to its broader engagement in mitigating the debt crisis in low and middle-income countries' (Mundy & Verger, 2015, p. 11). As Colombia experienced such a crisis in 1982, this rationale was imported into the country by governing elites. According to Parada (2013), as a response to the economic deceleration of the early 1980s, the government started adopting structural adjustment measures, which tightened its relationship with institutions such as the International Monetary Fund. The linkage of education with economic success was not a feature of the previous decades, but it would become a determinant one in the future planning of basic and

secondary education policy (Herrera & Acevedo, 2004). Chapter Three also discussed how the Caribbean did not experience the same economic progress during this decade as the rest of the country. As Parada (2013) also points out, the departments on the Northern coast saw hardly any industrial dynamism. The analysis in Chapter Five also quotes the works of Palacios & Safford (2002) and Correa de Andreis (2016a) to discuss how deviant material circumstances (i.e. the lack of industrial capacity) can also reflect the cultural distance between inhabitants from the Caribbean coast and the centre of the country. Interestingly, in today's schools, at least in the ones studied here, members of school communities do not envision education as a driver of their insertion into the economy of the region. Such a (dis)belief, next to the material circumstance of economic failure (SEP), becomes an important cultural element (CEP) to analyse why students do not perform as expected in standardised exams.

Throughout the 1980s, Latin American experienced the further institutionalisation of the economic discourses which, according to Palma (2009), impacted negatively on the emergence of new and creative institutional arrangements. In line with this author, the region under study in this thesis is one where 'the critical social imagination (...) has stalled, changing from a relatively prolific period during the 1950s and 1960s to an intellectually barren one since the 1982 debt crisis and the fall of the Berlin Wall' (p. 243). At the same time, violence in Colombia did not cease and moved into the cities due to the birth of drug cartels in the central regions of the country. For Novelli (2009), '[t]hese multi-dimensional aspects (armed conflict, resource wars, drugs, austerity and restructuring) have, since the 1980s, increased both the intensity and impact of the Colombian conflict' (p. 7). While the violence in the Caribbean was different from the that experienced during the *Era de la Violencia* (Correa de Andreis, 2016b), the region saw the increase of armed paramilitary groups with the support of regional elites (big landowners) to secure protection from reformists and left-wing guerrillas (Parada, 2013). Nationwide, the incidence of violence was one of the most important political (i.e. the demand for the distribution of political power) drivers for the decentralisation reform (Faguet & Sánchez, 2008). In fact, regionally, an analysis of the ordinances from this period shows the efforts of regional authorities to start building educational infrastructure during these years, after the holding of free elections for Mayors and Governors in 1986 by the departmental Governor.

Before the 1990s, and referring therefore to the initiation of T2 of the MGA, new external elements entered the education policy arena. In 1989, the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC), subscribed to by Colombia, introduced an international commitment to view education as a means to fulfil the rights of the under aged. While there were some pronunciations afterwards by the constitutional court suggesting that education is indeed a fundamental right, that did not appear explicitly in the 1991 Constitution (Cajiao, 2004). Even FECODE did not endorse that position, and privileged viewing education as a service subject to regulations. However, the issue of the role of human rights in society would become a cultural diver (CEP) moulding the Colombian education system from 1994 onwards, particularly as it would become an issue of future contestations in society. Back to ontology. The elements retrieved so far will come together, in line with Archer's (1995) analysis, to configure a set of situational logics that will shape further interactions between educational actors and agents. But first it is important to stipulate that the current object of study is Colombia's contemporary educational system, which, according to the earlier analysis, found its birth during the

late 1960s and throughout the following decades, as a result of three necessarily internal relations. These are i) the political violence in Colombia, ii) the massive population migration from rural areas to big cities and iii) the belief (or view) of education as a mechanism to civilise people into the customs of the elites. While i) and ii) are internally connected to each other (i.e. violence causes displacement), violence in itself justified the need for educational institutions to address the issue of coexistence as an explicit goal. However, the view of education as a medium to organise society (in a civilised way) is a force that should not be reduced to the material circumstances of violence in the mid-20th century, since it is a view with historical records in the Spanish Colony (Cajiao, 2014).

7.3.3. *The emergence of situational logics of action*

It is relevant to remind the reader that the current analysis intends to theorise about education failure in the areas under study, but not for the whole of the region or country. The reminder is important, as the leap taken in this section involves a transit from the national and regional level in the previous section, to *only* three schools in Northern Colombia. Willmott's (2002) ontological reflections in his study of schooling in England are of much worth in helping to justify this shift from a *macro* perspective to a *micro* (or school-based) one. For Willmott, to begin to conceptualise on the operation and the effect of new policy directions

.... a multi-level analysis is needed. From the morphogenetic approach such levels are not heuristic (that is, they are not observational ordering devices) but are *sui generis* real. The analysis of the interplay of structure, culture and agency is possible because socio-cultural properties pre-date the agency that transforms or reproduces them. The realist methodological device of analytical dualism employed here is due to the fact that any socio-cultural change is the outcome of a temporal sequence, whereby such change post-dates the action(s) that led to it. Such action itself was conditioned by an anterior context (...) Analytical dualism enables the practical researcher to examine the independent causal properties of structure and culture in order to examine the degrees of freedom or stringency of constraints they afford agency. As I have already argued, those who wish to misconstrue the morphogenetic approach as 'objectivist' tend to focus on the first part of the morphogenetic cycle, namely the identification of socio-cultural properties without reference to agency. To reiterate, the whole point of this is to examine how the socio-cultural context is shaped for actors in order to gain explanatory insight upon what they subsequently do in it or what they can do about it (...) The extent of such accommodation cannot be predicted or inferred from abstract socio-cultural properties *but must be established empirically* (...) The extent to which incongruent second- and third order emergent properties can be deflected *depends on local factors* (p. 221-222. *Emphases added*).

The process of structural conditioning in the previous section, hence, refers to education in the country as a whole, with some regional insights. The conditioning structures described above act, therefore, as objective forces on all primary teachers, parents, students, school directors, irrespective

of their desire to act upon them or recognise their constraining nature (Willmott, 2002, p. 222). The research for such overriding forces justified the need to explore national and even international dynamics that will eventually affect the day-to-day life at schools in different regions of the country. That being said, the history of education in Colombia, as examined in this document, involves (at least) three corporate agents (using Archer's (1995) language). These are the associations of educators (FECODE and ADEA), the national government (MEN, ICFES) and the local government (the Secretariat of Education in Atlántico). These social groups, it is clear, do not include the totality of collectives involved in education planning or the supply of educational services. However, and provided that the emphasis here is on public education, the set does include the most influential power groups. It is also important to clarify that conceiving MEN and ICFES as part of one collective entails the risk of conflating the views of institutions that express nuances in their position vis-à-vis educational priorities in the country. Nonetheless, given that the focus of the study is on the experience of schools in one sub-region, the views of these two groups can represent those of the National Evaluation System. As primary agents, one can refer to parents and students, two groups that, despite their distinctive role in the day-to-day practices at schools, have limited participation in education policy debates. Most school teachers belong to ADEA, and hence they are not included (for the time being) in this second group.

To theorise about the shaping of agency through the differentiated effects of pre-existent situational logics of actions, it is important to outline the vested interests of these collectives within the structure of education policy in the country in T2 of Figure 24 (and Figure 3 in Chapter Two). Again, much of this exercise is (highly) hypothetical, since the research design (and dealing with the MGA as a DSMT) only allows for an approximation of such interests. Along these lines, the current analysis elaborates on the following *assumptions* - which are, none the less, informed by the various types of information analysed here - about pre-structured positions that 'supply agents with reasons for pursuing change or defending extant arrangements' (Willmott, 2002, p. 36):

- From the 1990's onwards, the national government was in pursuit of instruments to decentralise the execution of the public budget to the regions, but without ignoring efficiency in public expenditures. However, the shaping of that role occurred as a result of the institutional dynamics from previous decades. Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, the idea (based on then current international debates) that education is a driver of economic performance entered the discussion on education. From that moment, the idea of decentralising education as a service (not in terms of planning and policy design, but only in terms of its administration) shows itself to be an emergent opportunity for the country to thrive economically. Such a priority seemed clear, in the light of international commitments to pursue the protection of children's rights. It is important to note that while the MGA distinguishes between actors, as role incumbents, and agents, as members of collectives, the information in this dissertation shows no clear indication of the importance of elaborating upon that distinction here. That is to say, evidence suggests that the public actions of public servants, as actors, coincided with the government's urge to better administrate the delivery of public services.

➤ Interestingly, while organisations such as FECODE have a clear Marxist ideological orientation, the interests of the teaching unions coincided with those of the government in envisioning the importance of maintaining a centralised component in the administration of resources. In line with elements discussed above, maintaining responsibilities in the definition and payment of educators' salaries in one national central institution rather than in atomised local authorities, represented part of educators' negotiating strength. Currently, all educators fall under Decree 2277 from 1979 that, at least at the formal level, represented a motive for cohesion in teachers' organisations, including ADEA. Teachers in schools, as local actors, would have presumably adhered to FECODE's preferences for reforming education and in bringing in more autonomy in the self-governance of primary and secondary educational institutions. Once again, education was not a right but a service, which helps to explain that educators on those days had few incentives to abandon more traditional and authoritarian ways of exercising their roles vis-à-vis pupils (Palacios N. , 2013; Cajiao, 2014).

➤ In the case of parents and students, Rodriguez (2015) points out that Law 115 from 1994, or the General Education Law, granted almost no explicit responsibilities to families in the education of children. Given that education was not a right but a service, he argues that the legislation made little effort to motivate parents to send children to school and to contribute to reducing dropouts. This situation refers to the national level. Based on experiences in the regions under the study, both of which are fairly rural, one can imagine that by 1994 local inhabitants did not see education as an opportunity for thriving socially or economically (that is not the case today). It is hard to identify the vested interests in T2 for families to send children to school (Chapter Five presented some regional economic statistics to reinforce this idea).

It is important to restate that the situational logics that 'are created by the relations within and between the various SEPs and CEP' (Archer, 1995, p. 216), act on agents according to their differentiated position within the structure. Consequently, the present analytic effort needs to emphasise those differentiated effects on society. By the early 1990s, the national government and the National Teacher's Federation (FECODE) found themselves linked to each other under the *logic of protection*. While these two parties represent different discourses (education as a driver of the economy vs education as a public good), they both joined together in sponsoring it as a service and not as a right. During that period, given the existence of only one teaching statute, FECODE had notorious political power as a unified and numerous force. Proof of that is the determinant role it had in defining the principles of the first National Education Law, Law 115 from 1994 (Gindin & Finger, 2013). This same situation created incompatibilities between these two forces and other sectors of society, who claimed that education deserved the status of a human right. Such a clash between unionised educators and representatives of academic and social movements might help in understanding the lack of empathy that the general public has today for teachers - a typical discourse in contemporary Colombia is that educators care more about their paychecks than the children.

At the same time, the situational logic of *compromise* is the logic best suited to putting together education as a driver of the economy with the inclusion of more people - parents and students - in the urban society. Here, elites influencing the national government were committed to receiving newcomers to engage in at least some of their traditions and customs, but they were not willing to address structural issues that caused the violence and forced migration from rural to urban areas in the first place. According to Archer, the rise of necessary compatibilities ‘means that the promotion of vested interests has to be a cautious balancing act, a weighting of gains against losses, were to accrue bonuses is also to invite or incur penalties’ (Archer, 1995, p. 224). When one observes the current situation in schools today, at least in Northern Colombia, evidence shows that for the poorest households, education does not represent an opportunity to thrive in the economy. Hence the contradiction arises, it is possible to hypothesise, as the expectations of the country’s elites of *civilising the poor* was barely compatible with that idea of education as a means of productivity and economic growth. The suggestion here is not that those ideas cannot cohere with one another in an abstract sense, but that they barely cohere with one another in the context of this analysis. The inherent instability of such an arrangement will become visible in the coming years as schools fail prevent the migration of violence from the countryside to the cities.

7.3.4. Social interactions: a non-deterministic account of structural morphostasis.

Before proceeding with the analysis of social interactions and their incidence in the shaping of educational social structures, it is important to make an additional clarification about the MGA, as discussed in Chapter Two. Archer wrote the following reflection in her 1995 book. The careful consideration of what she seeks to express here, vis-à-vis the broad understanding of processes of transformation (morphogenesis) or reproduction (morphostasis) in her framework, carries important methodological value to analysing the dynamics between T3 and T4 in Figure 3 of Chapter Two.

The decisive factor is thus the extent to which the morphogenesis/stasis characterizing the structural and cultural domains, at any given time, actually gel together (i.e. are the elaborations of SEPs and CEPs in step or at variance with one another?). Another way of putting this is to ask whether structural and cultural power is pulling in the same direction or not? Since agents are always the efficient cause of change and stability, then in still other words, how does the gel between structural and cultural morphostasis/genesis affect PEPs? In answering these questions we can theorize about where, when, and with whom transformational versus reproductive power lies (Archer, 1995, p. 304).

Much of the principles of the ontology of open systems in CR is reflected in this idea that it is possible to identify degrees of morphostasis and morphogenesis happening at the same time in the process of social (re)elaboration. In Archer’s (1995) language, researchers might identify, for instance, conjunctions and disjunctions between change in reproduction across, for example, ideational and material forces of society. That is the case, as the quote cited above recalls, because ‘the quantitative and qualitative nature of corporate agents’ interventions (as opposed to primary agents) are key

variables in explaining morphostasis and morphogenesis in conjunction with the situational logics they are embedded in' (Knio, 2013, p. 861-862). That is the whole point of analytical dualism; while situational logics condition social behaviour, they do not determine it nor conduct it through a deterministic (or linear) pathway. Likewise, as Chapter Two discussed, human beings and their social identity is the result of complex (and stratified) processes of action and interaction (i.e. the double morphogenesis of agency). The concrete implication of this for the current analysis is that, while one might identify dominant forces in society leaning towards (pure) forms of reproduction or change, it is often the case that results move between both of these extremes. These ideas have methodological implications that will become visible in the last part of the subsequent analysis.

Back to the cycle in Figure 24. In the second half of the 1990s, the idea of structural adjustment acting through education is one that proved to be, to some extent, in opposition to the decentralisation of political power as demanded by regional actors to constrain the spread of violence in the country. Such an immanent conflict within education policy entails a tension that, as the following events showed, finally led to the strengthening of a managerial view of education. In the school setting, contemporary conversations with local actors made clear that for current parents (many of whom were former students at schools in the research sites) and teachers (particularly for the most experienced ones) things have changed. Many of them refer, with a rather nostalgic tone, to the way things were before, when teachers had more authority over students, and students were better disciplined in the classroom. Palacios (2013) forwards the hypothesis that the openness towards electoral democracy in the spirit of the 1991 new constitution affected the transformation of traditional teacher-student relations based on the authority of educators over *right-less* children. With the spreading of fundamental rights, students became more aware of their opportunities to defy the power of school educators and administrators. Behind such conflicting relationships, and with nothing to suggest that parents in local areas had different ideas pertaining to the usefulness of education for the future of their children, one can find reasons to explain why, by the end of the decade, the exam results had not improved much. Both the Pacific and the Atlantic region of the country continued to perform below the national average (Ramírez & Téllez, 2007).

Internationally, Colombia became more committed to the institutions shaping the global governance of education, by linking secondary schooling to the pursuit of increasing economic growth. Figures by Mundy & Verger (2015) reveal that between 1996 and 2007 the country found itself among the top borrowers of the World Bank's educational funds. Vanegas (2003) argues that this coincided with the attitudes of the country's ruling classes in those days. Hence the World Bank's agenda for education was arguably an imposition at all. For the central government, the educational problem continued to be one of public management; a view endorsed and applauded by representatives of the Colombian academia, as seen in the policy documents [i.e. Barrera-Osorio (2005)] quoted in Chapter Three of this document. Both the institutionalisation, since 1991, of exams in the 3rd and 5th grades to assess the quality in education (Ramírez & Téllez, 2007), and the creation of compensatory funds to solve the financial problem of teachers' wages, are proof of these new priorities. At the same time, Montoya-Vargas' (2014) discussion on the lack of a tradition in the country in debating the school curricula is indicative of the lack of commitment (or interest) expressed by national authorities to a philosophy of secondary education beyond the needs of the market.

Meanwhile, at the regional level, the analysis of ordinances showed a clear emphasis of the Governorship of Atlántico in the building of new infrastructure for schools of the region, showing no major clashes in the discourse or the priorities towards education between the nation and the Department.

Towards the end of the 1990s, the economic crisis deepened the material reasons for strengthening the fiscal austerity discourse fiscal austerity (Cajiao, 2004). The logic that once showed coherence between the power of decentralisation (including in education) to contain political violence and to make the economy thrive seemed now compromised. That was in part because of the popularisation of the human capital discourse internationally, but also because it was not evident that the reforms to decentralise political power had reduced violence. Echandía (2002) argues that, in many cases, the transfer of national resources to rather weak regional institutions had a counter effect of opening the opportunity for armed actors in many territories to gain political strength through the co-optation of regional governments. Direct violence against educators should also help to understand why FECODE did so little, as representatives of that organisation admitted to the researcher, to take further advantage of schools' autonomy (included in Law 115) to pursue structural transformation in schools. According to figures presented by Novelli (2010), throughout this last decade, almost 400 educators were killed (that number escalates to 800 in the year 2006). For Novelli, this last hypothesis linking both phenomena finds support in the recent history of Colombia. For him 'teachers have historically been in the forefront of national liberation movements, and over recent years, in opposing processes of neoliberal educational reform (austerity measures, privatisation, decentralisation), which have become globalised via multilateral institutions, particularly the World Bank' (Novelli, 2010, p. 278).

The publication of Law 715 in 2001, which the cycle illustrated in Figure 24 situates between T3 and T4, is crucial to understanding the process, and the degree, of agential and structural elaboration of the logic of the contemporary education system in Colombia. What today's data indicates ('today', in terms of the last phase of the cycle, includes the decade and a half between years 2000 and 2014) is a high tendency towards structural morphostasis, at least in the Northern regions of the country that make up part of this study. Data retrieved from ordinances and official budgets defies this first conclusion as there is a visible increase in the material resources for education included in the regional budgeting. However, the analysis in Chapter Five shows how the possible driver for that increase responds more to the architecture of decentralisation itself (i.e. the formal commitment of the central state to make conditioned transfers to local governments) than to the initiative of local elites to devote new planning efforts to primary and secondary education. National authorities have shown a genesis in how they now try to build relationships with the local level (i.e. officials from the MEN recognise that it is important to respond to the initiatives and the requests from regional Secretariats of Education). Yet local authorities still seem highly dependent on what the national government says. Interestingly, the newspaper analysis in Chapter Six serves to support the hypothesis that those with

power *simply* do not care (or care very little) about educational debates, a situation that helps to explain the (relative) passivity of education officials in the region⁹⁷.

There is, however, some degree of cultural morphogenesis in the national education authority that is visible in the changes to the discourses that have accompanied the shifts in the emphasis of education policies through the years. When the priority was to debate the role of education to help to pacify the country, the vision of the national education project focussed on the better administration of resources. Part of that vision has changed, as now education has an important role in the economy, motivating debates about the so-called quality of education, an issue that, as the newspaper analysis also suggests, became a key topic for the national government in their communications with the public in the region. Here it is important to highlight how Chapter One made a detailed analysis of the ontological boundaries of what has become a mainstream practice in contemporary debate. Therefore, while the new approaches of the MEN (i.e. in teaching excellence) reveal some novelty (but also, the reiterative insistence on austerity in public expenses), one should remain sceptical about the government's power to promote radical transformation in schools (Montoya-Vargas, 2014). That doubt also finds support when one sees that such a priority has not shaped investments in the education sector in the Department of Atlántico. Two decades after the initiation of political decentralisation in the country, the authorities of this region are still consolidating their basic educational infrastructure (and related basic elements, such as access to public services in many schools).

In the case of teachers, these have experienced definite morphogenesis as corporate agents. The publication of the New Teaching Statute (Decree 1278 from 2002) represents a turning point in that regard. As Cifuentes' (2014) detailed analysis of the differences between teachers falling under the new and the old statutes contends, both groups have different (formal) incentives, as actors, when exercising their profession. The teachers falling under the new statute must not only pass exams to achieve a pay increase but need to carry out new tasks (the number of formal responsibilities shows an increase of at least 800% for the teachers falling under the new regime). At the national level, the issue is not trivial; the most recent figures presented by Bonilla & Galvis (2014) reveal that at least 21% of the teachers in the schools in the country fall under the new legislation, which shows a generational shift in the teaching profession. One can appreciate that the new generation of teachers are less politically engaged and express concerns and dissatisfaction with members falling under the old statutes representing their interests when negotiating with the Ministry of Education in the context of frequent strikes. One hypothesis that emerges here is that the negotiating power of the FECODE is starting to decline, partly because its new members face stronger structural pressures to comply with the demands of the government (i.e. to get better educated, to focus their efforts on the national examination results). This is the case even though these new demands do not show a clear connection with the notion of quality in education for people in regions in Northern Colombia. Conversely, with the strengthening of the pro-austerity discourse, educational authorities have succeeded in further

⁹⁷ Such a trend coincides with what Knio (2013) characterises as the possible disjunction between structural morphostasis and (some) cultural morphogenesis. According to this author, such a situation represents 'the beginning of a gradual ideational shift which can potentially stimulate a slow-paced social regrouping process' (p. 861).

unlinking education from political debates about curriculum, privileging technical discussions about instruction and the importance of measuring the productivity of class-time.

Still, what the analysis in Chapter Four reveals is that not all teachers are *badly prepared* and that not all of them stop making their best effort. It is important to mention this because according to mainstream research the main driver accounting for poor performance in tests by students lies in the *bad quality* of its educators. This is similarly the case for school directors, who, and at least in the schools in this study, try to do things differently. They do so despite the fact that new reforms have reduced them messengers between the national and regional government, and teachers, often responding more to the demands of the latter (Cajiao, 2014). The pressure on educators and directors in local schools is high, as, in addition to their various administrative tasks, they need to deal with children and families who barely believe in the benefits of schooling. As discussed in Chapter Five, they also have to deal with local governments that do little to actively support them with the required investments to improve *quality* in the primary and secondary education service. Such circumstances, in which teachers and school administrator have acquired a double role as educators and as *professional workers* (Novelli, 2010)⁹⁸, help to sustain a situation reluctant to change vis-à-vis the idea of the transformations of schools in order to meet the quality standards placed on them by the national education policy.

Finally, as the results of this study reveal, the situation of parents and students contributes to a resulting disengaged civil society with little will to push for further transformations in education policies. At least regionally, the process to transform primary agencies into corporate ones is non-existent. One could guess that this is, at least partly, due to the fact that for many of the families in the study, most of which live under situations of material poverty, education is simply an abstract issue that they can hardly connect to their daily lives. Parallel to that, there are indications that the poverty alleviation policies of the last two governments have contributed to the commodification of schooling by families (as a material means to solve the pressing economic issues of the households). Such a view, as the fieldwork in Northern Colombia indicates, goes against the notion of education as an emancipatory tool that will help them to make radical changes to their lives. Readers should note, however, that the argument here is not to suggest a lack of agential activity by parents and students. On the contrary, the lack of an apparent initiative to do much to pursue educational change (i.e. to change the situation of the persistence of bad school performance) is the result of a certain awareness that they will get very little benefit from doing otherwise.

Having reached this point, it is worth elaborating on the argument that, in spite of the identification of both morphogenetic and morphostatic forces operating in the social context of this research, the overall result leans towards morphostasis in the local education system under enquiry. In Archer's account, one key variable to advance in that type of argument lies in the 'quantitative and qualitative nature of corporate as opposed to primary agent's interventions' (Truong & Knio, 2016, p. 24). The

⁹⁸ Novelli (2010) presents that tension using the following words: "This contradictory role of teachers is reflected in ongoing debates over teachers being seen (both by themselves and others) as "workers" or "professionals" (Loyo 2001). As professionals, tasked with socialising the next generation, it has been argued that they occupy a privileged position within society. However, as civil servants and workers they are often faced with low status and low financial compensation, which forces them to act collectively to defend their interests, and in doing so this often leads them into confrontation with the state" (p. 278).

arguments presented in the last paragraphs suggest, precisely, the lack of evidence relating to the strengthening of new corporate agents. On the contrary, while the economic crises in the late 1990s granted momentum to the national government's discourse of *education for the economy*, the corporate agency of teachers experienced a process of cultural (i.e. new teachers are less politically engaged) and material (i.e. the legislation gave them additional responsibilities) differentiation. Cultural changes over time also suggest a new type of emerging relationship between families and teachers (i.e. the former used to respect the latter more in the past). However, no evidence links such dynamics with the reconfiguration of strong agential forces seeking to transform schools or the type of education that children receive. That whole situation dialogues with one of the abstract scenarios that Archer (1995) describes in her 1995 book. In her words:

Here the discontinuity is between one powerful structural agent alone and a number of corporate agents who have become culturally differentiated. In this configuration the fact that cultural morphogenesis is already under way, while structure remains morphostatic, points to the fact that Pluralism or Specialization has developed from internal cultural dynamics and the groups attached to them refuse to let corrective repairs stick or stable reproduction last. However, the co-existing state of affairs in the structural domain is morphostatic and continues to work through negative feedback, thus maintaining a particular form of social organization and eliminating deviations from this status quo (Archer, 1995, pp. 315-316).

The notion of status quo, in this case, reemphasises Soifer's (2015) work quoted before to argue against the real existence of a national education project. At least in the region of the study, the enactment of education policies reproduced the aims and the policy guidelines fixed at the national level, without an evident value added by local educational authorities regarding policy design. From that point of view, while the topics of discussion in the contents of education policy today importantly differ from those that prevailed across the 1960s and 1970s, education policy continues to reflect a centralised planning structure with a high technocratic and managerial bias. Such a situation generates few incentives, or possibilities, for more agents to contribute actively in the shaping of secondary education policies in Northern Colombia.

7.4. Conclusion

This Chapter focuses on unleashing elements from Archer's MGA to theorise about the persistence of poor school performance in Northern Colombia. The analysis combines elements from the different chapters of the dissertation to conclude with a rather pessimistic view of short-run perspectives for morphogenesis in the county's education policies. The analysis distances itself from a deterministic view of the issue, in the sense that it unveils multiple nuances concerning the different agents involved and the way they pursue different goals (i.e. different forms of structural morphostasis). At the aggregate level, however, the success of the national authorities in reducing the educational debate to one that is functional for the economy, represents a structural pressure towards morphogenesis from which it seems hard to escape.

The various empirical elements raised throughout this final (empirical) discussion of the thesis enable giving answers to the project's research questions and sub-questions. That task makes up part of the discussion in the conclusive Chapter of this dissertation (next Chapter). For the time being, however, it is relevant to mention the importance, as this Chapter unveiled, of considering subsidiary political economy debates to the thematic focus of the thesis (i.e. neoliberalism) as relevant methodological possibilities for researchers to make sense of human processes and dynamics. The understanding of people's day-to-day practices such as, for instance, interactions in a school setting and even in the classroom, benefits from situating the study of local contexts within the scope of broader political economy discussions about the shaping and the configuration of societies. This last idea dialogues quite easily with the structure and agency debate expanded in Chapters One and Two of this document, by providing explanatory power to the (particular) understanding of certain concepts (such as neoliberalism) commonly misused by researchers, activists and commentators⁹⁹.

⁹⁹ The debate about, for instance, neoliberalism needs, according to Edwards et al. (2012), to transcend simplistic views (i.e. good vs bad neoliberalism) that obfuscate the analytical power of political economy to make sense of human practices. According to these authors, 'many of these discussions of neoliberalism proved to be rather one dimensional. They fell back on the well-worn oversimplification which holds neoliberalism to be synonymous with 'free markets' and rolling back the state. While intuitively appealing, such a conception failed to capture many of the key developments in the global political economy during the neoliberal era. So, while the ongoing global economic crises provide a unique opportunity for fresh perspectives on neoliberalism and the neoliberal era, there is still a need to reflect on it in a deeper and more sophisticated way' (p. 1).

GENERAL CONCLUSION

The following excerpt from Palma's (2009) critique of the lack of transformative critical thinking in Latin America reflects the spirit of the conclusion of this dissertation:

Perhaps the greatest sign of the intellectual amnesia of the neo-liberal left in [Latin America] is to have forgotten that “[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas; (...)”. Manic managerial defences may be very useful for dealing temporarily with vital problems such as poverty alleviation and the modernization of the state, but they can hardly hope to become the ruling intellectual force of society. For example, it is no coincidence that these manic managerial defences have not led the neo-liberal left even into the temptation of questioning the conventional wisdom that in the current globalized world there is no role for human agency in the regulation of market forces. That would certainly be trespassing into a territory that is simply taboo for the ruling ideas
(...)

What we have today in LA is the combination of an insatiable capitalist elite, passive citizens, and a stalled social imagination. One could add that we also have a bunch of neo-comrades who are rather pleased with themselves. Only a few critical doctrinaires whine—particularly from their comfortable tenured positions in universities far away! Why can't the latter understand that life is so much simpler when one succeeds in transforming “delving deeply into the surface of things” into an art form? What is so wrong with making it one's basic tenet never to let one's ideology venture beyond ideas that can be googled? (Palma, 2009, p. 262)

The idea that regions such as Latin America require a renovation in their scholarly efforts to understand its real challenges, and alternatives for change, has been present since the inception of this document in Chapter One. This deconstruction, but also the setting of an ontological route to reconceptualise relevant concepts for social research (i.e. causality, mechanism), represents a current effort in exploring alternatives to the challenges of secondary education in Colombia. As the post-Marxist scholar Chantal Mouffe contends, “[t]his radical Reformism (...) can be envisaged through an immanent critique of liberal-democratic institutions [to search for these] radical principles”¹⁰⁰. Challenging the mainstream is hence not about an exercise in intellectual vanity, and neither it should fall into reproducing simplistic endeavours polluted by the logic of an approach of ‘critique for the sake of critique’ (Arsel & Dasgupta, 2015). The purpose of critical thinking should resemble more Apple's (2013) methodological insight that dictates that ‘to gain insight, to understand, the activity of men and women of a specific historical period, one must start out by questioning what to them is unquestionable’ (29). Without doing so, by jumping immediately to alternative frameworks to study

¹⁰⁰ The interview with the author was published at <http://en.theeuropean.eu/chantal-mouffe--3/7859-fighting-right-wing-populism-in-europe>

current realities in policy arenas, scholars risk reproducing alternative types of social determinism (i.e. reducing agency to structure, or doing the exact opposite), with a very restricted potential to foster change.

Critical realism, as a Domain-Specific Meta-Theory (DSMT), showed its usefulness in this dissertation to propose different ways of understanding educational failure in Colombia. Such an assertion deserves, however, some nuances vis-à-vis the argument that this study has indeed identified the drivers behind the reproduction of schooling failure and, consequently, opportunities for change. It is hence important to restate, given that the social world is an open system, that all answers to causal questions in social research are necessarily provisional or fallible. Saying that does not entail endorsing a relativist ontology where every answer is possible, but entails taking the ontological elements of CR seriously. The fact that there is a real world, despite the awareness of its inhabitants, means that good theories help researchers to make a start in unveiling the operation of real mechanisms. The corollary is that some theories are better than others in approaching the understanding of how these mechanisms operate and that the criteria to decide between theories resides not in their predictive power but in the consistency between ontological principles (i.e. their assumptions) and their capacity to related to real events. As Porter (2015) contends, ‘when asking [a] transcendental question, if our premises are correct, and if the trail of logic that we use is sound, then we can be confident of our conclusions’ (p. 173). Then again, the fallibility of such conclusions means that it is possible to refine them several times, after confronting emergent social theories with other theories, with additional empirical data and the opinions of other experts and commentators.

The use of Archer’s framework as a DSMT to create a middle-range theory about the persistence of school failure in Northern Colombia further justifies making these last epistemic assertions. Morphogenising the current study entails using tools from the MGA to theorise, or more precisely to hypothesise, about the elements of the causal processes that help to understand the persistence of school failure in Northern Colombia. From that view, the output of this dissertation is a fallible hypothesis about those underlying processes potentially explaining a phenomenon of interest but that, nonetheless, will allow researchers to transcend the ontological limitations of positivism to help scrutinise the contemporary challenges secondary education policies in society face. All these comments and clarifications are important as they allow us to visualise the strength and the potential challenges of the whole dissertation.

i. Synthesis of the thesis

Before proceeding with the presentation of answers to the research question and sub-questions, it is important to note the main contributions and findings that emerge from the analytical process undertaken in the different chapters of this document. In doing so, the caveat of treating all its results as fallible, or provisional, still holds. It is also important to insist, nonetheless, on how they provide useful insights into the real challenges of education in a country like Colombia, beyond the *fairy tales* represented in the linear and simplistic view of dominant approaches to school effectiveness (SE) research. The counter-critique applies to the overriding pessimism of some alternative approaches that study, as Chapter One discussed, the mechanisms of reproduction of capitalism via education policy

arrangements¹⁰¹. Likewise, the following set of conclusive ideas of the thesis combine elements from both the methodological reflection and the empirical inquiry of the research. As has argued since the Introduction of this document, this doctoral project is not solely about the identification of the causal drivers of the persistence of bad school performance, but about unleashing a comprehensive reflection on how to do better educational research, with a particular emphasis in Colombian politics.

1. The thesis is the first work of its kind in Colombia, and one of the few attempts in the whole Latin American region to operationalise a critical realist approach to the debate on secondary education. Assuming the acceptance of the realist ontology in many academic circles, and particularly in the field of education, the work has value by itself simply because of its status as a precursor of applied realist thinking in Latin America.
2. Via the path of an immanent critique, this thesis provides an innovative framework to study education politics in the country, distancing itself from the mainstream that privileges empiricism. The dominance of empiricism implies that social research in the field of education in Colombia is not relevant for identifying the causal drivers behind educational phenomena. The economics of education, for example, offers interesting insights into the way different variables correlate with each other but has very little to say about the mechanism through which secondary education policies reproduce the stagnation of education in the country.
3. The integration of different types of literature (i.e. from different epistemological traditions) with primary and secondary historical data (i.e. legal documents, newspapers, interview data) represents a comprehensive effort to show a *big picture* that scholars in the country hardly address or unveil. For instance, while many scholars theorise in the context of political decentralisation in the country, this document challenges whether decentralisation does indeed exist at all (or to some degree) and suggests, rather, that the actors in power in the country all tend to push towards a re-centralisation of education policies.
4. In line with the last two points, the findings of this document, which emphasise the lack of a strong educational system in the country and that relates to other institutional spaces at the national and the sub-national level, contribute by reclaiming the role of teachers in policy debates. The point here is not to endorse naïve positions with exaggerations about, for instance, the role and capacities of educators to foster radical changes in their

¹⁰¹ This last statement recovers the general comments of the thesis presented in the conclusion of Chapter One. The terminology used in this last phrase personifies the way in which Chang (2011) refers to the more generic debate about the study of institutional change (which is relevant for the structure and agency discussion of the dissertation) in the field of economics. According to this author, '[i]nstitutional economists need to pay more attention to the real world, both of the present and historical – not the fairy-tale retelling of the history of the world that has come to characterize mainstream institutional economics today (...) but capitalism as it really has been. Very often, institutional economic theories, including many non-neoclassical kinds, have been developed on the basis of rather stylized understanding of reality. However (...) reality is often stranger than fiction and therefore our theories need to be more richly informed by real-world experiences – both history and modern-day events. Only on this basis will we be able to develop theories that are nuanced enough to let us come up with policy conclusions that go beyond the wild voluntarism of the [SE] school and the simple-minded determinism of the [social reproduction schools]. Institutions have become politically too important to be left to those who believe in these simplistic and extremist arguments' (pp. 494-495).

- professions. However, the complexities behind the emergence of certain educational phenomena (i.e. the performance of students in tests) means that the diagnosis that educators are responsible for the lack of educational quality is simplistic and unfair. Blaming teachers without enough ontological (or philosophical) arguments might result in strengthening their frustrations as human agents, hence contributing to a further deterioration of classroom dynamics.
5. The thesis identified important contradictions in the role of education in contemporary Colombia, where education is presented as a mean towards improving the economy and directed towards fostering social cohesion. Without necessarily stating that these two goals should contradict each other, in the Colombian case, and particularly for some of its agents, they in fact do, as they set policy aims and rationales that have been shown to be incompatible. Teachers and school directors, for example, are expected to meet standards and to ensure that children learn principles and values. However, their administrative tasks and the demands of teaching excellence (i.e. the productivity in teaching) are detrimental to their possibilities of supplying a type of education that is interesting to students (i.e. to learn values) and to their parents (i.e. to teach children good manners).
 6. The reading of historical data (legislation, newspaper cuttings, secondary sources) reveals an apparent conjunction between the discourses on the importance of education in both the national and sub-national levels of the Colombian state. However, reality reveals the existence of important disjunctions between the actual efforts (or, one could argue, of the material realities) in the execution of education policies in the territories (at least for the regions studied here). The reading of mass media, for example, and bearing in mind some specific characteristics (such as the ownership) of the different periodicals reporting about educational dynamics, provides concrete indications of the lack of interest by regional elites to pursue the strengthening of the local institutions vis-à-vis educational planning (in context).
 7. This thesis deals with the study of persistence over time of an observable phenomenon such as poor school performance in the north of the country. Likewise, the critique in the dissertation deals with the persistence over time of the lack of innovation in the methods used by Colombian scholars to better understand the challenges to education. However, it is important not to conflate, as CR suggests, dynamics operating at different levels of social reality (i.e. the empirical vs the real). The historical explorations of this thesis show that, in spite of some persistence over time, policies and the conversations around the challenges to education have certainly changed. That is also the case when studying in detail the roles and the interests (to some extent) of relevant educational agents (primary or corporate) in the country. What the answer to the main research question suggests (see below) is that those changes (i.e. migrating from education policy to pacify the country to one that seeks to make it thrive economically) only reflects the interests for change by national education authorities. At the local level, this does not mean that households maintain neutrality (or are entirely passive) towards the evolution of primary and secondary

education policies. In fact, one could say, they are active in caring little about the role of education (at is offered to students) in their lives.

One can also enlist potential challenges permeating the finding of the thesis. These, more than weaknesses, point out future research paths to refine the theoretical appraisals in this document:

1. Commentators might legitimately ask themselves whether it is possible to support such big conclusions with non-representative data (i.e. from all the schools in the country). One first answer to that comment is to assert, once again, that statistical causation is a weak type of causation, meaning that big samples do not guarantee the production of representative explanations. A second answer, within a critical realist ontology, is to insist upon the argument that the findings of this thesis are fallible, and hence susceptible to future refinement with further research in different contexts (i.e. regions of the country). Here the point is not to suggest that the findings are, by definition, imprecise or incorrect. The stratified ontology behind the research design is a guarantee that the researcher made a deep exploration (or at least, one that is deeper than other existent ones) of the problem at stake in a specific context. However, the deepness of such an exploration will offer valuable elements for other researchers to help focus on the building of educational diagnosis in other regions of the country.
2. Given that the available literature on applied critical realist research is still relatively scarce, particularly when it comes to operationalising Archer's approach, many of the data analysis procedures in the thesis demanded creativity by the researcher. That reality means that many of the analytical outcomes of the thesis should be subject to critique. That is the reason for the placing this second comment as a potential challenge to the dissertation. However, going back to the discussion in Part I of the document, none of these creative efforts lacks an explicit ontological discussion backing them up. In that light, the analysis of qualitative data in this paper also represents a strength of the thesis, in the sense that it contributes methodological reflections on how to make sense of fieldwork data using a critical realist ontology.

ii. Answers to the research questions

The time has come to provide answers to the research questions that guided this whole doctoral project. Once again, the caveats of middle-range realism apply pertaining to the fallibility of these answers, but also to their potential to foster new education policy debates that transcend empiricism and actualism. The discussion in the final sections of Chapter Two indicated that the following queries reflect in their phrasing a morphogenetic view of social theory, and, hence, the analytical steps of the MGA. In short, the first sub-question deals with the dynamics occurring between T1 and T2 and in Figure 3 of Chapter Two and the second sub-question deals more specifically with the time span between T2 and T4. Consequently, the answer to the final research question conjugates the answers to both of those sub-questions.

Sub-question 1

What type of behavioural guidance (or situational logics) emerges from educational structures acting on the members (i.e. teachers, parents, teachers) of failing schools in Northern Colombia?

Different agents face different situational logics depending on their power position in the national educational system. The advantage to national and the sub-national governments (fiscally, discursively) is in safeguarding the connection between education and the economy. However, the national government fosters such logics through the deepening of the administrative, but not political, decentralisation of the Colombian state. The sub-national government of Atlántico has no major incentives to promote radical changes in the educational system, partly because the interested power groups from the Caribbean exhibit little interest in moving in that direction. Teachers, on the other hand, receive clashing messages from the national education policy (to act as professionals and as educators). That, added to the way in which the new legislation has fractured teaching unions (dividing people by status), has generated few objective chances to pursue radical changes. Parents and students from the region live in an institutional environment that provides them with hardly incentives to build a link between education and its benefits, which means that they have few incentives to devote time and effort to push towards educational reforms.

Sub-question 2

How do local agents (at schools) mediate the conditioning power of educational structures?

Members of the Ministry of Education expressed their frustration about the fact that the Secretariat of Education in Atlántico has taken very few initiatives to participate in and plan local education policies. Hence, while they would prefer other routes, the national authorities see the centralisation of education planning as an opportunity to build a national and standardised education system. They find support for their policies and initiatives in the advice of researchers who operate under the logic of the economics of education. Seeing education as a matter of productivity generates additional pressures on schools to find alignment with national (informal) curricula (the content of standardised exams), despite the autonomy of these institutions to draw up their own study plans. The local government of Atlántico does not show great willingness to empower itself in its policy planning and design endeavours. Within that logic (one of dependency) they find limits in the scarcity of resources, and in the lack of support from other state institutions (i.e. law compliance authorities) to improve exam results, which they endorse as the most important indicator of education quality. Teachers represent a heterogeneous group and a level diversity that transcends the simple division of education status to which they belong. Some teachers make a great effort, others do not. They face, generally speaking, strong structural constraints that lead them to morphostasis. Finally, parents and students fail to see the benefits of formal schooling. Hence the bad attitudes and lack of motivation of most of the students to thrive in schools.

Main research question

How to explain the persistence of poor school performance in national standardised exams in municipalities in Northern Colombia?

There is still no national education project in Colombia. The system exists, but the roles of its participants are unclear to them. These roles are stipulated in Law 715 from 2001. However, they fail to represent the real interests of the different participants of secondary education in Colombia. Students in Northern Colombia fail in exams because they do not see the purpose of not failing, partly because their social and institutional environment shows them that thriving in education is not relevant. Parallel to that, most of the education planning officials in the country operate under assumptions of empiricism and positivism, while educators respond (discursively) to Marxism and resist educational reform. Materially, however, this latter group can do little to resist (they depend quite importantly on their jobs as educators). As a real dialogue between the parties barely exists, the perspectives for radical change are quite pessimistic.

At this point, it is worth going back to the initial debates in the thesis about the author's normative position in disputes; such as the dispute pertaining to the appropriateness in using test scores as a standard to measure the failure or success of schools in their day-to-day educational activities. In the first lines of this document, the author responded that such a debate was less relevant - in the context of the thesis - than other debates that referred to the proper way of studying causal phenomena in education. The suggestion then was to wait to comment on the issue until the empirical work in schools (and the educational systems that surround them) provided a backup of findings. From the insights retrieved in the study sample, and with the caveat that such insights might be different when studying other contexts, the evidence suggests that test scores are a weak proxy for evaluating what schools and teachers try to do vis-à-vis children's education. This is because there is little that school communities can do due to the lack of institutional support (i.e. to receive their resources promptly) and without a proper social infrastructure (i.e. the existence of job opportunities) that help to make education (as it is) relevant to its potential users. In this way, indicators such as the results in standardised exams are, perhaps, a proxy of the (in)existence of motivations for communities (i.e. students, parents) to value the educational supply in their territories. However, if the aim is to improve those scores, education officers ought to consider one particular element that is absent from the atomised way in which experts (in their positivist way of thinking) conceive education policies as something that only deals with the actions or omissions of educational authorities. In the end, if Colombian territories want to see their students thrive in these exams, then it is time for the country, and its representatives, to start visualising education as part of a broader system. Hence, to improve educational standards policy discussions should transcend the sector of education by inviting other sectors (i.e. from other government Ministries to other institutions that safeguard, for instance, the adequate use of public resources) to participate in that debate.

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APPENDIX 1. The “positivist” approach to the economics of education

The economics of education, regarded as the dominant approach in the study of the determinants of school performance, is inscribed into the epistemological foundations of the *Human Capital Approach* (HCA) (Blaug, 1992; Milonakis & Fine, 2009). Becker's (1993) notion of *human capital*, or the embodiment of humanly oriented investments, implicitly regards the household (rather than the individual) as a firm that seeks to maximise the allocation of time and the accumulation of wealth. Furthermore, efficient families work under schemes of specialisation or division of labour and, consequently, they make consumption decisions according to factors such as ‘the income and preferences of parents, the number of children, and the cost of child quality’ (Becker, 1993a, p. 179). The benefits, as this paradigm has addressed, include the expectations of future consumption, as well as the flourishing of altruism or the minimisation of parental feelings of guilt regarding the present and future well-being of their closest relatives.

Methodologically speaking, the HCA in education departs from the notion that investments in schooling are ‘typically conceived as being carried out by individuals acting in their own interests’ (Blaug, 1992, p. 209). When thinking in family units, the Socio-Economic Conditions of the household (SEC) represents a proxy variable to the children's motivation to study. For instance, more educated parents invest more in the education of their children, partly because they are more aware (than less educated dads and moms) of the benefits of schooling (Gyimah-Brempong & Gyapong, 1991). The school, on the other hand, is regarded as a production unit whose primary objective is ‘to maximize the academic achievement of pupils, subject to the resources available’ (Bradley & Taylor, 2004, p. 390). Such a definition makes sense under logics of competition, where the level of enrolment depends on the quality of the type of learning that is supplied by each school.

Empirical studies usually focus, therefore, in the estimation of an education production function (Bowles S., 1970; Hanushek E., 1979; Gyimah-Brempong & Gyapong, 1991) in the reduced form $A_i = f(X_i, Y_i, Z_i)$. Here individual achievement (A_i) depends on the student's skills (X_i), the school's environment and investments (Y_i) and context variables (Z_i) that might affect the performance of pupils in exams. Empirically speaking, Bradley & Taylor (2004), Checchi (2005), Dancer & Rammohan (2007) and, Jola (2011) use the education level of the parents as a proxy variable for both household income and for the motivation that children receive to study hard. This second approximation matches Becker's (1993) argument that ‘children from successful families are more likely to be successful themselves by virtue of the additional time spent on them and also their superior endowments of culture and genes’ (p. 179). Household characteristics frequently include other indicators such as monetary income, endowments of cultural goods (libraries, books, access to technology) and the number of family members.

Common trends in the economics of education also refer to the way in which the schooling environment might affect children's performance in exams. Consequently, many countries have undertaken policy paths in which ‘class size has fallen, qualifications of teachers have risen, and expenditures have increased’ (Hanushek, 2003, p. F65). The rationale behind this lies in theoretical predictions that higher expenses per pupil should endow students with more learning technologies to

improve their learning process. Similar predictions have prompted, especially in developing countries, the necessity to increase the participation of the private sector in the supply of primary and secondary education. The basic assumption here is that the public sector is inefficient in the provision of public goods, hence the importance of non-official institutions as they are expected to have not only more financial resources, but also better incentive schemes for teachers and administrative staff (Angrist, et al. 2002). Nonetheless, the evidence of the supply side of education is far less conclusive. The literature tends to point out the cost-quality ratio fades not only when controlling for household characteristics (Hanushek, 2003), but also as a possible result of weak governance environments surrounding the schools (Duflo et al., 2012).

Other literature in this field focusses, hence, on how institutional surroundings influence school outputs. When referring to public service delivery, the existence of inclusive institutions – or those that favour the inclusion of the citizenry in decision-making and economic activities (Vries, 2012) – fosters the ‘accountability of politicians to the electorate’ (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006, p. 48). In this sense, theories of institutional economics envision the quality of public goods as a result of the existence of institutions that promote the rule of law (i.e. protection of property rights) and political competition. Here the evidence focusses on the relationship between institutions and children’s assistance in school, rather than in a direct reflection on test scores. But again, results are mixed. For example, while Scott & Al-Roumi (1999), Hiskey (2003) and Hecock (2006) provide evidence to support the positive impact of electoral competition on the quality of local public services, Cleary (2007) and Moreno-Jaimes (2007) fail to do so. Similarly, and after revising 16 country cases, Mejía-Acosta, Joshi & Ramshaw (2010) conclude that ‘the association between accountability and service provision is complex, sequential and context-specific’ (p. 27).

Finally, the quantitative literature has also approached the measurement of education *quality* gaps by making reference to sociological notions of school as an institution that reproduces social inequalities. It follows that advantaged children, or those that have certain household and family backgrounds that tend to favour their performance in school, also attend educational institutions that provide them with more learning resources (Condrón & Roscigno, 2003). Some causal mechanisms, such as the reproduction of elite affiliation through the reward of certain behaviours, students’ dress codes, or the differential relationship that exists between teachers and pupils from different ethnical groups or economic statuses, have been discussed to explain the persistence of inequalities. Within these traditions, studies such as Downey et al.’s (2004) and McEwan’s (2004; 2008) report the existence of test score gaps between black and white populations in the United States and indigenous and non-indigenous populations in Latin American countries. The conclusions, nevertheless, are also mixed in terms of explaining whether observable differences are more attributable to school environments or individual characteristics.

These theoretical insights will inform the empirical inquiry in Chapter One of the dissertation. The building of an econometric model should take into account, when possible, different levels that can affect, directly or indirectly, school performance. These include students’ household and family, his/her school and the socio-economic context in which he/she lives. This last aspect should allow the researcher to have some understanding of how institutions can affect the quality of education. All of this discussion should, however, contribute to the broader analysis posed by the research question

informing this document: the causes of regional gaps in educational quality indicators. According to the economics of education, the observation of these three levels (household, schools and municipalities) should contribute to solving the conundrum.

APPENDIX 2. Extension of multi-level modelling in education

Statistically speaking, multi-level modelling (MLM) seeks to correct problems with Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) when some observations are not mutually independent. In the case of an education production function, students can share unobserved characteristics (i.e. going to the same school and receiving instruction from the same teacher) and, therefore estimate standard errors can be deflated (Hox, 1998; Bickel R. , 2007; Albright & Marinova , 2010)

$$\text{Average test score}_{ism} = \beta_{0sm} + \beta_{1sm}X + \epsilon_{ism} \quad (1)$$

Equation (1), which follows Bickel's (2007) notation, serves as an example of the first phase of a multi-level approach to studying school effectiveness. The model uses individual (i) examination scores as the dependent variable. Students are nested in schools (s) and municipalities (m). In this case, and for the sake of simplicity, X represents an individual variable (i.e. age, sex or education level of the parents of the individual) and β_{1sm} its estimator associated with the school (s) and the municipality (m). Finally, ϵ_{ism} captures the effect of omitted variables. This first equation represents the first level (Level one) of the model.

$$\beta_{0sm} = \beta_{00m} + \mu_{0sm} \quad (2a)$$

$$\beta_{1sm} = \beta_{10m} + \mu_{1sm} \quad (2b)$$

$$\beta_{00m} = \gamma_{000} + \mu_{00m} \quad (3a)$$

$$\beta_{10m} = \gamma_{100} + \mu_{10m} \quad (3b)$$

Multi-level models deal with both the intercept and the slope of Equation (1). Paraphrasing Bickel (2007), there are good reasons to suspect these vary across a level-two grouping of variables such as the school of the individual. Consequently, β_{0sm} represents the mean score for students in school (s) in the district (m), while slope β_{1sm} accounts for the average effect of variable X for individuals nested in one same educational institution. These are represented in equations (2a) and (2b) respectively and form Level 2 of the model. The same applies to equations (3a) and (3b), which represent a third hierarchy (Level 3) or, for instance, the municipal level of the education production function. Equation (4) accounts for the complete model, which is the result of replacing equations (2a), (2b), (3a) and (3b) in equation (1). This specification is most commonly estimated using Full and Restricted Maximum Likelihood estimations (FML and REML). Although they both produce identical results, the latter 'takes into account the degrees of freedom from the fixed effects and thus produces variance components estimates that are less biased' (Albright & Marinova , 2010, p. 12).

$$\text{Average tests score}_{ism} = \gamma_{000} + \gamma_{100} X + \mu_{00m} + \mu_{0sm} + \mu_{10m}^* X + \mu_{1sm}^* X + \epsilon_{ism} \quad (4)$$

APPENDIX 3. Parents' main occupation (sample of senior students)

Occupation (%)	2013					
	National		Caribbean		Municipalities of the study	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Entrepreneur	1,9	0,8	1,2	0,5	0,6	0,3
Small entrepreneur	2,6	2	1,9	1,3	1,3	0
Employed as a manager	1,8	1	1,4	0,7	0,6	0
Employed as an executive	1,1	1,2	0,9	0,9	4,2	0,3
Employed as a professional	7	5,7	7,8	5,4	1,3	3,9
Employed as an assistant	2	4,5	1,5	2,9	9,4	1,9
Employed worker or operator	21,7	7	17,2	2,8	1	1,9
Independent professional	3	2,6	2,3	1,9	45,1	0,3
Self-employed	37,1	10,9	47,9	10,9	1,6	6,8
Household care	1,1	54,8	0,9	65,4	2,9	77,6
Retired employee	3,3	0,9	2,4	0,5	31,8	0
Other activities	17,4	8,7	14,6	6,8	0	6,8
SAMPLE SIZE	574.817	574.817	118.816	118.816	308	308

Source: Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education, ICFES. Author's calculations.

APPENDIX 4. Highest educational level achieved by parents (sample of senior students)

Educational level (%)	2013					
	National		Caribbean		Municipalities	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
None	5	2,5	5,6	3,8	3,2	6,2
Incomplete primary school	20,2	17,7	18,6	17,1	34,7	29,2
Complete primary school	15,6	15,6	14,3	14,9	14	14,9
Incomplete secondary school	14,2	16,6	15,3	17,5	22,4	23,1
Complete secondary school	22,2	25,5	24,1	25,5	19,8	17,2
Incomplete tertiary education	1,5	1,9	1,7	1,9	1	4,2
Complete tertiary education	4,8	6,3	5,7	6,6	2,6	1,3
Incomplete undergraduate degree	1,4	1,6	1,3	1,3	0,3	0,3
Complete undergraduate degree	8,2	8,3	8,8	8,2	1,6	2,9
Graduate degree	2,2	2,1	1,7	1,5	0,3	0,3
Does not report	4,8	1,9	3	1,7	0	0,3
SAMPLE SIZE	575.069	575.072	118.822	118.823	308	308

Source: Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education, ICFES. Author's calculations.

About the author

Mr Juan David Parra has a BA in Government and International Relations, from Universidad Externado de Colombia, and a MA in Economics, from Universidad de los Andes (Bogotá). His professional career splits between academia and working as a consultant in policy evaluation at Econometría Consultores. He has published before in journals such as *The British Journal of the Sociology of Education*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Papel Político*, *Sociedad y Economía* and *Economía y Region*.